

HUG YOUR CACTUS:  
AN APPROACH TO SOUL CARE

A THESIS-PROJECT  
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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis-project is to demonstrate that the metaphor of “hugging your cactus” can work as an approach to soul care, especially in the context of a person whose life, or at least a significant part, is not working due to a self-imposed crisis. The life of the Pharisee Saul who became the Apostle Paul was explored as a Biblical example of this reality. Literature around three traditions: The Enneagram of Personality, Contemplative Prayer, and the 12 Steps was also explored. Feedback from peers involved in soul care was gathered to develop online resources for Hugging Your Cactus.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

### Reality Check

In 2018 I started the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I went into doctoral studies with the intention of sorting out my ministry models and passions which are in the areas of community outreach and multicultural missions. However, in going through the first two years of readings, reflections, and projects I started to realize that my studies were more about sorting myself out. This really should come as no surprise as Simon Vibert, my D.Min. studies mentor and professor suggested: "One reason people write books is to sort out their own issues and questions."<sup>1</sup>

The stated purpose of this D.Min. program is "to nurture passionate, reflective practitioners."<sup>2</sup> While passion has never been an issue for me, I am still learning how to balance out that passion with a little more reflection. Regarding my own deeper spiritual understanding, early 2018 proved to be the starting point. Up until that point I dabbled in different approaches to spiritual growth, but also managed to keep from going too deep or out of my comfort zone. I tended to admire disciplines like silence and solitude from a distance; I believed that they were great activities for certain types of people, but not for loud extroverts like me. However, I began to feel the longing to do something deeper for my own spiritual journey that Lent. I decided to combine this desire with my need to develop the habit of

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<sup>1</sup> This quote was part of a class discussion Simon led during the weeks of July 2-13, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> As shared in class lectures by David Currie, Director of D.Min. program, during the weeks of July 2-12, 2018.

writing more as I was about to start my doctoral studies. I had been a huge fan of the band U2 for decades and was familiar with the spiritual meanings and Biblical imagery found in many of their songs. I decided to write a forty-day Lenten devotional blog with each day focusing on a different U2 song.<sup>3</sup> This proved to be a lot more work than I had anticipated; but it also sparked an interest in going deeper in my own spiritual journey.

Shortly after finishing the blog, I was invited on a 24-hour prayer retreat with other pastors. After we arrived Walt, the facilitator, started talking about the need for silence and solitude in our spiritual development. My first thought was that I had been tricked and looked for a way to escape. However, by the end of the 24 hours my thoughts had changed, and I wanted to learn and experience more. From there I continued to explore, research and seek new experiences in the areas of silence, stillness and solitude. That summer I started my first year of D.Min. studies which focused on the pastor as a soul care provider. The studies of these topics only reinforced my desire to grow in these areas, and eventually produced a project titled “A Loud Extrovert’s Guide to Silence and Solitude.”

My second summer of studies focused on the pastor as person; this took these experiences and reflections to the next level. A good example of this occurred when I was asked to read the book *Preventing Ministry Failure* and to reflect on a potential area or two where I might potentially fail or burn out in ministry. Ironically, the answer for me came under the topic of stress management. I have never thought of myself as one who is constantly under stress or allows stress to prevent me from functioning in my work or personal life. In reality, I have more than once been accused of going along on my way and allowing others to stress for

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<sup>3</sup> [www.40withu2.blogspot.com](http://www.40withu2.blogspot.com): The 40 blog is still active, and the entries have been viewed over 12,000 times.



me. However, as I read through this topic in more depth, I discovered a section that described highly productive and high functioning people in ministry who tend to “thrive on chaos” and are “addicted to their own adrenaline.”<sup>4</sup> When I first read that section I paused as it hit me hard and right out of nowhere. As I read through the various descriptions related to this tendency, one stood out as an accurate description of myself: “I love working under high stress because I am more productive under such conditions.”<sup>5</sup> This caused me to start questioning why I seem to need chaos and adrenaline to maximize my effort and productivity. This was also an extremely helpful process as I realized the need to experiment with and embrace different paces of life and ministry. In this I started to wrestle further with the apparent paradox I found myself in as I reflected on the words from the band U2’s lead singer Bono, “There is a part of me in chaos that is quiet.”<sup>6</sup>

Another assignment that summer proved to have an equally strong impact on me both personally and as a pastor. I was to choose from a list of books that featured the lives of fictional clergymen and relate in a personal way to one of these characters. I chose the book *Glittering Images*, which tells a redemptive story focused on Charles Ashworth, a Church of England clergyman in the late 1930s. The most compelling scene of the book is when Charles’s own “glittering image” of himself and his life comes crashing down and he feels completely separated from himself, reality, and even God. It is at this time that he comes under the spiritual direction of Darrow, a senior clergyman, who helps Charles to explore and understand his life with discernment and carefully restores him spiritually and emotionally. At the

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<sup>4</sup> Todd M. Wilson and Brad Hoffman, *Preventing Ministry Failure* (Downers Grove.: IVP Books, 2007), 108-109.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson and Hoffman, *Preventing Ministry Failure*, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the song “I’ll Go Crazy if I Don’t Go Crazy Tonight” from the 2009 album *No Lines on the Horizon*.

beginning of this process Darrow told Charles. "It's the glittering image who should be locked up...I'm beginning to feel very, very sorry for this true self of yours...He's cut off, isolated by that ruthless jailer."<sup>7</sup> That development in the story caused me to relate to Charles in a more personal way; for example, having been through divorce, I identified with the despair and guilt Charles felt over his failures as a husband and loss of a marriage. From here I started considering my own glittering image or images and the times they came crashing down in my life, leaving me to face the "real self" behind the glittering image. Words from Darrow to Charles again proved to be significant. "We want to restore your belief in your own worth so that you can find the courage to set aside the glittering image and triumph over this tyrant who's tormented you for so long."<sup>8</sup>

This combination of facing my own glittering image as well as an over dependence on chaos and adrenaline sent me on a journey of self-discovery that has changed my life for the better. I started to recognize increasingly not so flattering things about myself, including some patterns of behavior that were negatively impacting even some of my closest relationships. After a series of events that included my fiancée at the time and me agreeing to call off our engagement, I realized that certain things in my life were not working in the way that I wanted them to. I was finally in the right time and place to face the glittering image or false self that was robbing me of the ability to fully embrace and accept my true self. As I was working through and even lamenting the implications of these realities in my life I sought the counsel of several people, including a counselor and spiritual director. One close friend and colleague

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Howatch, *Glittering Image* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1987), 235.

<sup>8</sup> Howatch, *Glittering Image*, 235.

asked me to consider the question, “Who is Chris without chaos and adrenaline?” Another told me that I needed to; “hug the cactus” which meant to embrace the ugly parts of my soul. Later that afternoon he sent me a link to a short speech that the actor Robert Downey Jr. gave when introducing Mel Gibson, who was presenting Downey the 25th American Cinematheque Award during a benefit gala.<sup>9</sup> Downey’s use of the metaphor of cactus hugging helped to crystalize and give a language to a lot of what I was trying to sort out internally. As I started to share this analogy of cactus hugging and the short video with others, several of them seemed also to connect personally with it in a similar way to what I had experienced. From there I began to realize that cactus hugging also has the potential to help shape certain aspects of and approaches to soul care. For the sake of myself and the hope that it might also benefit others, I began the process of better understanding the cactus hugging metaphor.

### **Defining Cactus Hugging**

As I already mentioned the metaphor of “hugging the cactus” comes from a speech that the actor Robert Downey gave as he was introducing his friend Mel Gibson during an award presentation. During this time Gibson was going through some public struggles of his own and was a somewhat unexpected choice for the honor. “To some surprise, Downey gave the gift of public acceptance to the embattled actor [Gibson] ...the defense was a return of kindness for Downey. Gibson gave *The Avengers* actor a job in 2003’s *The Singing Detective* after his drug

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<sup>9</sup> The award gala was held at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California on October 14, 2011.

arrests made him uninsurable.”<sup>10</sup> With this time in mind, Downey reflected on the following advice his friend had once offered him:

Actually I asked Mel to present me with this reward for a reason. When I couldn't get sober, he told me not to give up hope, and he urged me to find my faith. It didn't have to be his faith or anyone else's, as long as it was rooted in forgiveness. And I couldn't get hired, so he cast me as the lead in a movie that was actually developed for him. He kept a roof over my head, and he kept food on the table. And most importantly, he said if I accepted responsibility for my wrongdoings and if I embraced that part of my soul that was ugly — “hugging the cactus,” he calls it — he said that if I “hugged the cactus” long enough, I'd become a man of some humility and that my life would take on a new meaning. And I did, and it worked. All he asked in return was that someday I help the next guy in some small way. It's reasonable to assume that at the time he didn't imagine that the next guy would be him or that someday was tonight.<sup>11</sup>

In this short, yet powerful speech I see several concepts forming around this idea of cactus hugging. Not only that, in looking at the speech more closely I see the outline of a cactus hugging journey being mapped out, a journey from shame, brokenness and false or shadow self towards humility, healing, and ultimately a life of new meaning. This cactus hugging journey is laid out in six parts, which I will examine in this thesis-project. The six parts are presented here in the order of Downey's speech; however, the journey itself is much more fluid and should not be understood in terms of a rigid sequence. As my own journey has affirmed, there is actually much movement in and out of the different parts and a person can be working through more than one of the parts at the same time.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Anne Hughes, "Robert Downey Jr. asks world to forgive Mel Gibson," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2011, accessed August 10, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIQANRnCrL\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIQANRnCrL_blog.html).

<sup>11</sup> *The Telegraph*, "Robert Downey Jr asks forgiveness for Mel Gibson," October 18, 2011, accessed August 10, 2020, video, 2:03, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_AAJuynxnTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AAJuynxnTQ).

## When Life is Not Working, Don't Give up Hope

In the speech above the phrases “I couldn’t get sober” and “I couldn’t get hired” are used by Downy to describe his life having reached the point to where at least one aspect of it was no longer working for him. Coming to this realization is then the first part of the cactus hugging journey. This realization can come from a variety of sources like a broken relationship, a severe loss, trauma, or even a dysfunctional pattern of behavior. This then is often where one’s own “glittering image” or false self rears its ugly head. Terms like “broken,” “in despair,” and “helpless” are often used to describe how one feels when that individual realizes that something in their life is no longer working. However, it is generally only when people get to this point that they are ready to truly face their reality. This can seem overwhelming, especially at first. “When we find ourselves in the rugged terrain of self-knowledge, we may feel very alone, we may feel ashamed, we may feel as though we are the only ones who have ever had to experience such a soul shaking experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Gibson’s advice “to not give up hope” becomes especially important here. Part of this hope is to realize that this cactus hugging journey is part of our shared human experience, so one should never feel as though they are going through it alone, because they aren’t. Instead, comfort is found in that, “because we are human and therefore limited, flawed, and imperfect. The name of the game ... is I’m Not All-Right, and You’re Not All-Right, But that’s Okay - THAT’S All-Right.”<sup>13</sup> It is then from this place of hope in personal brokenness that one moves on to the next part of the cactus hugging journey.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 102.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 28.

## Find a Faith Rooted in Forgiveness

In this second part of the journey Downey describes Gibson as urging him to “find my faith” and to make sure it is “rooted in forgiveness.” Faith here can simply be understood as appealing to help from something greater than one’s own self. Gibson’s own deep Christian faith as Catholic is well documented and was expressed for the world to see as he developed the film *The Passion of the Christ*. However, Gibson insisted that it not be his faith, instead making forgiveness the qualification for Downey in finding his faith. Forgiveness is so important to cactus hugging because as one faces the brokenness and despair of the aspects of their life that are no longer working, they need to experience more grace, not increased guilt and shame. Christianity at its best understands grace as the free gift of God’s forgiveness in relation to Jesus dying on the cross for the sins of the world. While sin is certainly connected to forgiveness it is also helpful “to see sin, like addiction as a disease, a very destructive disease instead of something that was culpable, punishable, or ‘made God unhappy’ ... because God desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease.”<sup>14</sup> This helps in the transition out of despair to the understanding that “the biblical perception of the gospel of grace is that of a child who has never experienced anything but love and who tries to do her best because she is loved”<sup>15</sup> With this in mind we can transition to another part of the journey.

## Take Personal Responsibility for Wrong Doings

In this next part of the cactus hugging journey Downey describes how Gibson helped restore his life and career by providing him with work and a place to stay. But “more

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2011), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Brennon Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 86.

importantly” he was also helping restore his soul; first by saying “if I accepted responsibility for my wrongdoings.” Taking personal responsibility is virtually impossible without first experiencing grace and forgiveness, because here a person will need the grace to seek forgiveness, receive forgiveness and even forgive themselves. Here the focus can start shifting to others, specifically those who have been harmed. “Our family, friends, and enemies, however, are not as kind or patient as God. They need a clear accounting to be free and go ahead with their lives. Often, they need to talk it through, hear our understanding and maybe our sincere apology. Usually, they need to offer their understanding of the situation and how it hurt them.”<sup>16</sup> Doing this work and having these conversations is by no means easy and needs to be understood as a process that is going to take time and help from trusted friends, counselors, ministers, and other soul care providers. Taking personal responsibility also means that “the imposter must be called out of hiding, accepted and embraced. He is an integral part of my total self. Whatever is denied cannot be healed. To acknowledge humbly that I often inhabit an unreal world... and that I am driven by vain ambition is the first blow in dismantling my glittering image.”<sup>17</sup> Now we move to the next part of the journey, where we finally are ready to meet and start hugging our cactus.

### Embrace the Ugly Parts of Your Soul

This is the part of the journey where Downey Jr. introduces the metaphor of cactus hugging in reference to Gibson saying, “if I embraced that part of my soul that was ugly —

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<sup>16</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Manning, *Abba's Child*, 43.

‘hugging the cactus,’ he calls it.” Therefore, cactus hugging can be more specifically understood as embracing the ugly part or parts of one’s soul. These ugly parts of the soul will come to the surface as one takes personal responsibility for their wrong doings and starts to face their false self. A false self or “glittering image” as previously discussed, is simply a distorted version, not unlike a caricature, that people create for themselves; and it is “born when as children we were not loved well or were rejected or abandoned... To gain acceptance and approval, the false self suppresses or camouflages feelings, making emotional honesty impossible.”<sup>18</sup> The cactus or ugly parts of the soul are to be embraced because they are not going anywhere. Embracing then means to love and accept one’s own ugly parts, while also learning to minimize the damage caused. This is then essentially soul or spiritual work because “if spirituality begins as a cry for help, it becomes a way of living with – of putting up with – our human imperfection.”<sup>19</sup> This embracing of the ugly is a painful reality, which is why the metaphor is hugging a cactus with thorns that hurt. Ironically, it is through the painful experiences of the cactus hugging journey that one starts to discover and draw closer to their real self. To quote another U2 song, “You’re packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been; a place that has to be believed to be seen.”<sup>20</sup> With this in mind we continue to the next part of the journey.

### Do This Long Enough and Gain Some Humility

In this part of the journey Downey Jr. continues to unpack the idea of cactus hugging by saying that Gibson also told him that if “I hugged the cactus long enough, I’d become a man of some humility.” This serves as an important reminder that this is a journey that is going to take

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<sup>18</sup> Manning, *Abbas Child*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Kurtz and Ketchum, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from the song “Walk On” from the 2000 album *All that You Can’t Leave Behind*.



time and that simply becoming aware of one's false self is important, but not an end to itself. "Self-awareness is the beginning of liberation, but becoming stalled in a self-gazing posture quickly leads to a form of narcissism... Getting to the reasons why we stay stuck in the patterns that keep us tethered to our illusions offers clarity."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, cactus hugging is something that is going to have to be done for a while, for a period of time that is "long enough" to get genuine results. How long is long enough will be different for each person, but the one hint that we get from Downey's speech is when one becomes a person of "some" humility. This will include accepting that life is not just about yourself and accepting getting input from others, giving them the permission to offer fair and honest feedback. It's here that the ugly parts of the soul, "those defects are probed, studied, analyzed, for better understanding that leads to love and forgiveness; and you will discover to your joy that you are being transformed by this strangely loving attitude that arises within you towards this thing you call yourself."<sup>22</sup> As one learns to face their false self by loving and reining in the ugly parts of the soul and discover the joy and freedom of their true self, genuine humility will naturally follow. Now that this cactus hugging journey has started to produce true humility, we embark on the last part.

### Life Will Then Take on a New Meaning

In this last part of the journey, Downey gives the ultimate goal of cactus hugging when he shares how Gibson told him "that my life would take on a new meaning." When one starts this journey the idea of a life with new meaning seems an almost impossible dream. Instead, one might wonder, "What is left after we have been stripped of the false self, when the tear

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher L. Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 207.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony de Mello* (New York: Image Books, 1995), 146.

has gone so deep that we fear that our very essence has been ripped away?”<sup>23</sup> Over time, what once seemed to be one’s self being ripped away has actually created the room for the true self to finally come out and be seen. So new meaning happens as one learns to “above all not fight the truth of yourself. The self ‘comes clean’ when it is exposed, most vulnerable to its own imperfection... In weakness strength is discovered, in wretchedness, joy... for while spirituality is always *beyond*, it is discovered first within.”<sup>24</sup> So new meaning comes as one finds peace with their true self, while their false self is exposed, and the ugly parts of their soul embraced. Here Downey also shares his own personal response to the entire journey here saying, “and I did, and it worked.” He is acknowledging that this cactus hugging journey transformed his life; he went from a major part of his life not working, to embracing the ugly parts of his soul, and finally into a life of new meaning.

### **Hypothesis: Cactus Hugging as Soul Care**

All of this leads to the need that I am addressing in this thesis project. As I have shown already the cactus hugging journey as laid out in the speech of Robert Downey Jr. worked for him personally and has also made a significant impact on my own personal and spiritual life. As I continue to engage with people both as a pastor serving a congregation and as an active part of the greater community, I am seeing the parts of this cactus hugging journey being played out more in the lives of others. When I have shared my own cactus hugging journey with others, I have already discovered that people tend to personally relate to its ideas in a variety of ways.

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<sup>23</sup> Barton, *Invitation to Solitude*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Kertz and Ketchum, *Spirituality of Imperfection*, 40.

Therefore, I believe that there is a direct connection between the idea of cactus hugging and the care of souls. It is my hypothesis that the cactus hugging metaphor works as an approach to soul care, specifically, in caring for people when parts of their lives are no longer working. I plan to demonstrate that it works because it helps people embrace the ugly side of their souls and in doing so brings hope, humility and new meaning to people who feel stuck in their personal brokenness.

The purpose of this thesis-project is then to make this cactus hugging journey accessible to individuals that might benefit from it personally and/or find it useful as resource for providing soul care to others. From Downey Jr's speech hugging your cactus is being defined here as: When one's life is not working due to a self-imposed crisis, embrace the ugly part(s) of your soul long enough to become a person of humility and for life to take on new meaning. Embracing here is understood as both loving this part of self for it is not going away and yet seeking to rein it in and limit its damage.

### **Biblical and Theological Example**

To develop this idea Biblically and theologically I will be mapping out the six parts of the cactus hugging journey as they relate to the life and teachings of the Apostle Paul. Here I am going to interact with Paul's life as he describes it in the letters he wrote and how it is presented by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. The well-known contemporary Pauline scholar Tom (N.T.) Wright and his work *Paul: A Biography* will be the primary guide here. I will also be working with some other key works of Wright and others who have contributed to the research of Paul. Here I will show how Paul lived out the six parts of the cactus hugging journey

personally, even to the extent of claiming that he had been given a “thorn in the flesh.” I will interact with Paul’s writings as they relate to this journey, showing how his experiences shaped both his actions and teachings.

### **Engaging the Literature More Broadly**

After developing the metaphor of Biblical cactus hugging through the life and teachings of Paul, I will then interact with the metaphor of cactus hugging in its broader context. Here I will look at some different examples of how the spiritual journey from brokenness and despair to self-discovery and new meaning has been addressed. Here I will engage three concepts as they relate to the parts of the cactus hugging journey: The 12 Steps, Enneagram of Personality and the spiritual disciplines of meditation and contemplation. My primary guide for this chapter will be the work of Richard Rohr, the Franciscan Priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Rohr has written extensively on spiritual direction and the care of souls for the last several decades, including each one of these three concepts. Through the writings of Rohr and others who have contributed to these concepts, I will work through the six parts of the cactus hugging journey and their implications for soul care a second time.

### **Data Collection and the Project**

I will outline the parts of the cactus hugging journey as shared by Robert Downey Jr. in his speech, explore how they relate theologically through the experiences and teachings of Paul, and then interact with some significant contributors regarding these issues. I will then collect the data needed to test my hypothesis. My primary means of data collection will be

conducting focus groups that expose people to the ideas associated with six parts of the cactus hugging journey and to see how they resonate with those ideas. The results from this research will be utilized to develop a brief, practical and reader friendly “Guide to Cactus Hugging” as my research project. This guide will not be intended serve as a “quick fix” for people trying to sort out the ugliness of their own soul journey or providing soul care to others. Instead, it will serve as an introduction to the issues related to the metaphor of cactus hugging as laid out in the speech by Downey. At the end of this thesis-project I will provide three levels of engagement with the metaphor of cactus hugging in relation to soul care. The first and most basic will be the summary of my research found in a series of You Tube videos and other social media engagements that will make the ideas around cactus hugging more accessible. At the next level will be my deeper research into the various aspects and parts of cactus hugging as presented in this thesis. Finally, I will provide an extensive bibliography and an appendix with resources for those who might like to explore these areas even further. All of this is done with the hope that those who interact with the various parts of my thesis-project will learn to personally experience and live out the words from the theologian, poet, and songwriter from Northern Ireland, Pagraig O’ Tuama, “and I said, ‘will I ever find meaning?’ And he said ‘you will find meaning where you give meaning. The answer is in a story and the story is unfolding.’”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted from the spoken word “Narrative Theology” from the 2010 album *Hymns to Swear By*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### Invitation

The cactus journey at its core is a response to an invitation from Jesus that was first offered to twelve of his closest followers. “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’”<sup>1</sup> Cactus hugging then involves surrendering the harmful part of self to gain a fuller sense of self in Christ. “It implies here not only the control and suppression of all ungodly lusts, but also the willing sacrifice of all our natural affections in the service of God.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not possible to embark on this journey of self-discovery without a willingness to deny, or as it is sometimes referred to “die to” self and follow Jesus. This includes acknowledging and addressing the personal desires and even the patterns of behavior that are obstacles to one’s life working as it should. As one denies self, one is able to face and deal with the shadow side of the self and ugly parts of the soul.

As I mentioned in the opening chapter of this thesis-project, the life of the Apostle Paul, originally known by his Hebrew name Saul, serves here as the primary Biblical and theological example of cactus hugging. However, Paul is certainly not the only character from the Bible whose cactus hugging journey could have been mapped out here. Before choosing to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 16:24-25, ESV.

<sup>2</sup> C.F. Schaeffer, *Annotations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, edited by H. E. Jacobs (New York: The Christian Literature Co.), 19.

Paul I considered several other characters including Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, and Peter just to name a few. This demonstrates that hugging your cactus can apply to a wide range of different people in a variety of contexts. Again, for the sake of clarity hugging your cactus is being defined in this thesis-project as: When one's life is not working due to a self-imposed crisis, embrace the ugly part(s) of your soul long enough to become a person of humility and for life to take on new meaning. Embracing here is understood as both loving this part of self for it is not going away and yet seeking to rein it in and limit its damage. We therefore engage Saul/Paul with this definition in mind. Paul's own epistles or letters and the book of Acts written by St. Luke provide the necessary insight into his journey through the six parts of cactus hugging. The works of N.T. (Tom) Wright, particularly his biography of Paul, are helpful in understanding the Apostle's life in the context of being a first century Jewish Roman citizen. One thing I have found particularly helpful in utilizing *Paul: A Biography*<sup>3</sup> and similar sources is how they lay out and deal with Paul's life chronologically, or at least to the best of their ability. Much of the details of Paul's life, including the order in which Paul wrote some of his letters, are difficult to know with any certainty. Therefore, Wright and the other authors lay out the life of Paul in an order of events that at times is speculative at best and certainly subject to debate. There are often multiple theories and perspectives on many of the details of Paul's life. This treatment of Paul is not meant to cover all aspects of his life, but to focus instead on the substantive parts of his personal journey from Saul to Paul as it relates to cactus hugging. In the journey from Saul the Pharisee to Paul the Apostle we see a very real example of a person

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<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2018).

going from the brokenness of their life not working to a life of new meaning as he embraced the ugly parts of his soul.

One helpful insight from Wright in regard to Paul's own cactus hugging journey is his emphasis on Paul's background as a zealous student of the Torah in the school or tradition of Shammai. The followers of Shammai and his rival Hillel represented the two prominent schools of thought in Paul's day. Paul's famous teacher Gamaliel represented the school of Hillel, "If the Romans wanted to run the world so be it. Jews would study and practice the Torah by themselves."<sup>4</sup> Paul in contrast made the following statement: "Shammai who maintained if God was going to establish his reign on earth as in heaven, then those who were zealous for God and Torah would have to say their prayers, sharpen their swords, and get ready for action."<sup>5</sup> This zeal and readiness for action put Saul on a crash course with his own cactus, a personal encounter with Jesus and the invitation to deny himself and follow. Yet before that, we first encounter Saul in direct conflict with the early followers of Jesus, whom he believes pose a threat to this prophesied reign of God. "With his Bible in his hand, zeal in his heart, and official documents of authority from the chief priests in his bag, young Saul sets off in the firm hope that he too would be recognized as true covenant member."<sup>6</sup> It is from this place that Saul enters the first part of his own cactus hugging journey.

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 39.



## **When Life is Not Working, Don't Give up Hope**

The cactus hugging journey almost always seems to begin with a crisis of one form or another that exposes the reality that one's life in general, or a major aspect of life is not working. In the case of Robert Downey Jr., the crisis was that his own addictions were threatening to end his career and even possibly his own life. For me personally it was a drive and addiction towards chaos and adrenaline that was causing damage to my relationships and my own inner peace. However, a crisis in itself does not necessarily lead one to hug the cactus or otherwise seek the help needed to get better. That only comes when one accepts that their life is not working and takes the painful steps needed to live and behave differently. If cactus hugging begins with a crisis, few if any have experienced this more famously than Saul did on the road to Damascus: it even led to a shift in being known by the Hebrew version of his name to the Greek Paul. The phrase "A road to Damascus experience" to describe a life changing event seems to have become just as well-known as, or even more so than the person who first experienced it. This incident or crisis clearly had a life-changing impact on Saul as it is narrated by Luke in Acts 9 and described by Paul himself three times in Galatians 1, Acts 24, and Acts 26. As it relates to Paul's own cactus hugging journey it is important to consider; "What was going on in Paul's mind and heart that day? What transformed the zealous persecutor into the zealous apostle?"<sup>7</sup>

With that in mind it is important to understand that up to the point at which Saul encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was totally unaware that his life was not working. In reflecting back on this reality in his letter to the Galatians, Paul comments, "For

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 41.

you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”<sup>8</sup> He clearly did not see anything wrong with what he was doing in persecuting the early church and followers of Jesus. He understood his zealous actions as helping him to advance rapidly in the eyes of the Jewish leaders and honor the traditions of their fathers. When we first encounter Saul in Acts, Luke is very honest about Saul’s feelings and intentions. At the stoning of Stephen, the little side note, “and Saul approved of his execution,”<sup>9</sup> lets the reader know that not only was Saul there, but that he was proud of his actions. And in describing the persecution of the church fueled by Stephen’s death we read: “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this encounter with Jesus “came to him as an unanticipated interruption in his life as a Jew. Paul claims here, as elsewhere that he was an exemplary Jew... Paul’s Judaism was neither half-hearted nor unsuccessful.”<sup>11</sup>

Even though Saul did not realize it at the time, his life was not working, and like many people it took a crisis for him to realize it. A life crisis can be described as, “When therefore something shakes someone to the very core, so that that person emerges from the cataclysm in some ways the same but in other ways radically different.”<sup>12</sup> This is an important point in understanding the cactus metaphor. Despite the transformative nature of Saul’s encounter

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<sup>8</sup> Gal. 1:13–14, ESV.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 8:1, ESV.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 8:3, ESV.

<sup>11</sup> E. Krentz, J. Koenig, and D.H. Juel, *Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 29–30.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 44.

with Jesus, the qualities that made up the person of Saul up to this point continued in Paul after. Even after “hugging the cactus” one does not become a completely different person and Paul was no exception to this reality. For, “The zeal that fired Paul in his missionary efforts also existed before his conversation. It was an aspect of his personality.”<sup>13</sup> Now it was an aspect of his personality in crisis that was causing much harm to both others and him, yet it was also a part of Paul that would always be with him. This is seen almost right away as the same Saul who was going into Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus finds himself instead being received by them. After a vision from the Lord, one of their initially reluctant leaders Ananias even restores Saul to sight and baptized him. Having barely gotten his strength back and even before he is referred to by the Greek version of his name Paul, Saul’s zeal thrusts him into action. “Immediately he enacted the revelation given to Ananias that he, Saul, would carry Christ’s name before “the sons of Israel” (v. 15). In the synagogues of Damascus, he proclaimed Jesus, and did so repeatedly.”<sup>14</sup> In reading Luke’s account in Acts the writer makes a shift from using the Hebrew name Saul to the Greek Paul and after quick visits to Jerusalem and then home to Tarsus he is ready to go full throttle into his next venture as the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles. Yet, Paul still had to face the reality that his zealous persecution of the church caused a lot of damage to others, himself, and even Jesus.

In Paul’s own account from Galatians, we see that it was another fourteen years before he is commissioned by the pillars of the church to start his missionary work to the Gentiles. The details of what happened in this time between are very scarce, but in this same letter to the

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<sup>13</sup> James Montgomery Boice, "Galatians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans-Galatians, Vol.10*, edited by Frank E Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 433.

<sup>14</sup> G.A. Krodel, *Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 178.

Galatians, Paul “injects another episode into the mix at this point. This extra episode, when properly understood, strongly reinforces our developing picture of the hothead young zealot suddenly stopped in his tracks. He went away, he says, to Arabia. What is that all about?”<sup>15</sup> This is one place where N.T. Wright as my primary guide for Paul and his cactus journey makes a significant contribution. However, it is also worth noting that Wright does not take the most commonly accepted viewpoint here, which he acknowledges. “So why Arabia? The clunky, obvious, straightforward answer is that Paul was eager to tell people about Jesus and that Arabia was where he went on his first ‘evangelistic mission.’”<sup>16</sup> This view has some merit and certainly on the surface it seems to fit with his zealous pursuit of following God and the ancestral traditions. As his understanding of both expanded to include Jesus as the promised fulfillment of the Messiah one may conclude that, “He went to carry out his task as apostle, a title he implicitly claims in v. 17. His call led to immediate proclamation of the gospel that required no human approbation.”<sup>17</sup>

However, this commonly held view does not consider all factors. For one, if Paul went to Arabia for the purpose of apostolic proclamation, he never mentions it in his own writings nor does Luke in Acts. There are no letters to churches in Arabia or anything to connect him to missionary work there, which seems a little odd based on the amount of information that we have on his later missionary work. Also, this view does not really account for the extent to which the Damascus Road encounter would have rocked Saul’s world and understanding of God. One important aspect of cactus hugging is that it takes time to process the reality that

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Krentz, *Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians*, 31-32.

one's life is not working. This is why not giving up hope is so important. Saul needed time to sort things out. "When it pleased God to reveal Jesus in him, bitter enemy of the church as he was, he 'conferred not with flesh and blood,' but went away for solitary meditation into Arabia."<sup>18</sup> Coming face to face with the ugly parts of your soul is not an easy process for anyone, even with all the zeal and desire of a strong personality like Saul. All of this "would have shown Paul that he had been wrong about Jesus. However, the replacement of his Jewish world and life by a Christian theology would have been the work of more than a long weekend."<sup>19</sup> This need for Saul to put in the hard work of facing himself is at the heart of Wright view regarding the journey to Arabia, and more specifically Sinai. "Sinai, the great mountain in Arabia, was, in that sense the place of beginnings... Sinai was where Elijah went when it all went horribly wrong. Sinai was where Saul of Tarsus went – for the same reason."<sup>20</sup> Or for the sake of this thesis-project, Sinai is where Saul went to hug the cactus and in doing so become the Paul who helped change the world. In the tradition of many before Saul and many since, he went on a spiritual pilgrimage to meditate and contemplate life as he worked through the parts of his life that were no longer working. Instead of losing hope he went on to affirm the direct revelation he received from Jesus and his calling as "an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead"<sup>21</sup> His life was not working so, "this then is why he went to Arabia: to hand in his former

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<sup>18</sup> William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 185.

<sup>19</sup> Boice, "Galatians," 434-435.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Gal. 1:1, ESV.

commission and acquire a new one. His loyalty to the One God of Israel was as firm as it had always been.”<sup>22</sup>

As his loyalty to the One God of Israel remained firm, though redirected, so did his hope. Throughout his writings Paul lifts up hope, often tied closely with faith and love, as one of the primary virtues or ideas for the follower of Jesus. To Paul, hope was tied to a very specific idea which is evident as he defends himself before the Jewish Council in Rome. “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.”<sup>23</sup> This caused great confusion for the Pharisees on the Council, even conflict between them and the Sadducees. However, for the sake of understanding Paul in relation to not losing hope, “the reason for their confusion goes to the heart of the difference between what the young Saul of Tarsus had believed and what Paul the Apostle had come to believe.”<sup>24</sup> Paul had come to believe that the ultimate source of hope for himself and others was found in the glory of God as revealed in the promised resurrection of the dead. In understanding Paul as an example of cactus hugging this eschatological hope needs to be seen in the context of suffering. Paul addresses the ideas of both hope and suffering many times throughout his letters and one place where they come together is in chapter five of his letter to the Romans.

While suffering often comes from external sources and circumstances, it also comes as a consequence to one’s own behaviors and choices; this is the suffering that relates to cactus hugging. Throughout his life Paul experienced plenty of suffering from both sources and here he gives a reason for hope in all forms of suffering. To Paul the source of this hope is Jesus,

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 23:6, ESV.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 358.

which he makes clear before addressing suffering directly. “Through him (Jesus) we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”<sup>25</sup> For Paul the natural response to Jesus as the source of hope, through whom we have obtained grace by faith and the promise of the glory of God, is to rejoice. Yet, for Paul this is not the only reason to rejoice as he “carries over to another area totally different in nature as well as in time – namely, that of ‘suffering.’”<sup>26</sup>

For the person on the cactus hugging journey, rejoicing while not losing hope is essential to moving on from the parts of their lives that are not working. There is going to be suffering and challenging times ahead, but Paul understood that rejoicing in the suffering will produce a hope that does not disappoint. “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.”<sup>27</sup> Facing the cactus or the ugly part of the soul can easily put anyone to shame, yet remaining in hope actually does the opposite; it removes shame. Paul understood that this does not happen easily or quickly, but over time, so he emphasized a sequence of ideas that build upon each other; suffering to endurance to character to hope. In this sequence, “Hope returns in a circle upon itself. Faith tested and approved, produces hope in enhancing and confirming it.”<sup>28</sup> Paul firmly believed that this kind of hope never leads to shame, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through

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<sup>25</sup> Rom. 5:2, ESV.

<sup>26</sup> Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Romans-Galatians, Vol. 10*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 57.

<sup>27</sup> Rom. 5:3-5, ESV.

<sup>28</sup> H. E. Jacobs, *Annotations on the Epistles of Paul to the Romans and 1 Corinthians, Chaps. 1–6* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), 99.

the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”<sup>29</sup> Through his own sufferings, especially the self-inflicted ones, Paul learned first-hand the importance of maintaining hope in moving forward. Through his personal encounter with Jesus and his understanding of Jesus and the resurrection as the source of hope, Paul is now able to see suffering in a new light. “Now the apostle is not only enabled to bear suffering without illusion and without despair, but is also enabled to see, in it, the bodying forth of the dying and rising of the Messiah.”<sup>30</sup> As Saul the zealous persecutor became Paul the zealous Apostle, he no doubt suffered as he faced the parts of his life that weren’t working. Through it all he never lost hope, a hope based on Jesus the promised resurrection of the dead.

### **Find a Faith Rooted in Forgiveness**

The next part of the cactus hugging journey for one whose life is not working involves finding, discovering, or perhaps even rediscovering a faith that is rooted in forgiveness. Faith, specifically in the One God of Israel, was a constant in the journey from Saul the zealous persecutor to Paul the zealous Apostle of the Gospel faith. As Saul had encountered the risen Jesus and was working through the reality that parts of his life were not working; he also came to a new understanding regarding faith and forgiveness. This was, as has already been addressed, a time-consuming process where not only did Saul go to Arabia (likely Sinai); but also returned to Tarsus for a decade before Barnabas retrieves him to start his public ministry as we know it. As with his time in Arabia, virtually nothing is known regarding what Saul did during his time back in his hometown in Tarsus. One thing that is certain though is that when

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<sup>29</sup> Rom. 5:5, ESV.

<sup>30</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2009), 146.



Barnabas did come, Saul was ready to go and live out his Apostolic calling to the Gentiles at an impressive pace. Here Wright again offers a helpful perspective. “Saul then, I propose, spent the silent years in Tarsus laboring, studying, praying putting together in his mind a larger picture of the one God and his truth that would take on the world and outflank it.”<sup>31</sup>

As he put this together in his mind, Saul most certainly interacted with his own family and others who knew him as a zealous Jew, and who must have been confused by his radical new perspective on what it meant to be a faithful follower of Yahweh. This would have given Saul plenty of opportunity to work through the implications of this larger picture, to both the Jewish community he came from and the Gentile community he was called to be an Apostle to. In this process of Saul becoming Paul, he came to understand that faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah was a faith rooted in forgiveness for all. “The Jesus shaped message of liberation included forgiveness of all past deeds, and this message of forgiveness meant that there could be no barriers between Jewish Messiah people and Non-Jewish Messiah people.”<sup>32</sup>

Paul the Apostle understood that this liberating forgiveness included his own past deeds as Saul the zealous persecutor, which no doubt helped him to not lose hope as he continued his own cactus hugging journey. One place where Paul makes clear the importance of a faith rooted in forgiveness is during his speech before Herod Agrippa in Acts 26. In this speech as Paul is defending himself against the accusations of the Jewish leaders, he goes back more than 25 years to his own encounter with Jesus. On that day Jesus made it clear to the young Saul that I am “delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you

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<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 79.

to open their eyes, so... that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”<sup>33</sup> While defending his Apostolic calling to the Gentiles, Paul uses the words Jesus gave him that day to validate his calling and vocation. In this calling he is sharing the gospel message Jesus had given him so that the Gentiles may also “thus receive what fallen man needs most of all, forgiveness of sins, and in consequence the eternal inheritance that those only can obtain who by faith in Christ have acquired.”<sup>34</sup> To Paul then, faith in Jesus and forgiveness are inseparable; you cannot have one without the other. The faith he discovered coming out of his “cactus hugging” encounter with Jesus was firmly rooted in forgiveness. Wright makes another important observation from this same speech answering the question, “whether the Paul’s gospel message was either personal forgiveness or the inclusion of the Gentiles. This verse is true to what Paul says in every letter from Galatians right through Romans, indicates that it is both.”<sup>35</sup> Paul understood that faith in Jesus included a personal forgiveness from the one true God that equally included both Jews and Gentiles. Paul also believed that the forgiveness from God was transformative. “But grace is manifested not only in God’s acceptance of sinners but in the transformation of those thus accepted into the likeness of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> When Saul the zealous persecutor encountered Jesus and understood that he was accepted and forgiven by God, he also started to deny himself, becoming Paul the Apostle.

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<sup>33</sup> Acts 26:17–18, ESV.

<sup>34</sup> F.W. Stellhorn, *Annotations on the Acts of the Apostles, Vol. VI*, edited by H. E. Jacobs (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1896), 380.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 368.

<sup>36</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 19.

Paul did not limit this understanding that faith in Jesus as the Messiah was rooted in forgiveness from God. He also emphasized the importance of personal forgiveness between people. Although Paul talked a lot about forgiveness as both an idea and action, for example the letter to Philemon, it is worth noting that Paul, does not employ the terminology of forgiveness very much.”<sup>37</sup> One place where Paul does use the term for forgiveness in relation personal forgiveness between people can be found in the letter we now know as 2 Corinthians. Here Paul is dealing with a specific situation involving an individual whose actions have caused harm to both Paul and to the church in Corinth, and the church has responded by punishing the individual. Paul responds to this in his letter showing pastoral care and concern for the individual. “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”<sup>38</sup> Paul’s direction to forgive the individual here is very important in understanding the cactus hugging metaphor in relation to the care of souls. Paul understands the fragile condition of the offender who is clearly repentant of his wrongdoing. In this he understands it is now time that “the Corinthians ought to rescue the man from inordinate grief and complete his reformation by forgiving and encouraging him.”<sup>39</sup> In this passage Paul also affirms his own forgiveness towards the offender, assuring them, “Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> In this he is helping them see how forgiveness is fundamentally rooted into their faith in Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, editors, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 311.

<sup>38</sup> 2 Cor. 2:5-6, ESV.

<sup>39</sup> Murray J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans-Galatians, Vol. 10*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 329.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Cor. 2:10, ESV.

From his days as Saul the zealous persecutor to becoming the Apostle to Gentiles Paul experienced forgiveness firsthand, even from those he had persecuted. This is apparent in that, “as his argument proceeds Paul emphasizes the importance of forgiveness as part of the Christian life... What is abundantly plain is that Paul sees it as important that both he and Corinthians should forgive the offender.”<sup>41</sup> Paul’s own cactus hugging journey was shaped then by a faith in Jesus as Messiah rooted in forgiveness; both personal forgiveness from God and forgiveness between fellow humans.

### **Take Personal Responsibility for Wrong Doings**

The next part of the cactus hugging journey is to take personal responsibility for one’s wrong doings. For Paul the Apostle, this meant coming to personal terms with his own failures, including his actions as Saul the zealous persecutor. For, “When Saul encountered the news about Jesus, his mind was not a blank slate. He had been going full tilt in the opposite direction.”<sup>42</sup> As we have already explored here this was a heavy reality for Paul and must have been a lot for him to process; this likely explains his journey to Arabia (Sinai) and his ten years back home in Tarsus. Luke, in writing Acts, and Paul himself do not seek to hide Paul’s shortcomings, so even after he became Paul there was much for him to come to terms with.

He had an uncanny gift, not only for inspiring and convincing, but also for causing riots. And with a pen that must have eaten through the papyrus like acid, he cursed his rival missionaries and made fun of his converts. He even quarreled with the gentle and widely respected Barnabas, who had sponsored him and looked after him.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 312.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Image Books, 2010), 26.

However, what is also clear from Paul's own writings and his portrayal by Luke in Acts, is that he consistently took responsibility and faced this reality head on.

Some 30 years after encountering Jesus on the Road to Damascus, Paul demonstrated his willingness to take personal responsibility in his first letter to Timothy. While training his young pastoral apprentice he echoes the comments to the Galatians and during his trials in Rome regarding his past actions, claiming that his appointment to serve Jesus came, "though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief."<sup>44</sup> Despite the fact that he was acting out of ignorance at the time, Paul still understood that his previous words and actions were wrong. Therefore, his claim of acting out ignorance "is not meant to abate his confession or to palliate his wickedness, which would conflict with the obvious intent of the whole passage to magnify the forgiveness of the Gospel, but "only to illustrate the merciful procedure of divine grace."<sup>45</sup> Paul understood that his actions in persecuting the church had harmed many people and beyond that the very God that he had been zealously trying to follow. Paul's claim of receiving mercy here is important and remains a key idea as he continued this theme of taking personal responsibility to Timothy, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example."<sup>46</sup> By mentioning that he had received mercy twice here to the impressionable Timothy, Paul was going out of his way to show that he was in need of mercy, or restraint from deserved punishment, for his actions. Paul took these actions

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<sup>44</sup> 1 Tim. 1:13, ESV.

<sup>45</sup> E. J. Wolf and E. T. Horn, *Annotations on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and the Hebrews and on Philemon*, Vol. 10, edited by H. E. Jacobs (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 16.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Tim. 1:15–16, ESV.

so seriously that he claimed the title “chief of sinners,” proclaiming that no one needed mercy more than him. This was almost certainly driven in Paul by the likely reality that “everyone in the early church knew of his persecuting activity, and it was a background that he could not avoid, but was bound to carry with shame wherever he went.”<sup>47</sup> All this to say Paul was well aware of his own personal failures and the need to take personal responsibility for them.

Another place where Paul did not back down from taking personal responsibility for his actions is recorded by Luke in Acts 26. Here Paul, while on trial in Jerusalem, was asked by King Agrippa to defend his actions. Paul accepted responsibility for the awful actions that his zeal drove him to commit. “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth... And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”<sup>48</sup> In this account of Paul’s actions he is the most open and vulnerable in accounting for the motives and consequences of his actions. “The sketch of Paul as persecutor is drawn in sharper, darker colors in comparison with previous reports. We hear of the divine ought (v. 9, Greek, *dei*). Paul believed that his persecution of Christians was the will of God”<sup>49</sup> Paul in his zeal wanted nothing more than to follow God’s will, so the words from Jesus on the way to Damascus must have stung him to the core, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, instead of turning towards total despair, Paul responded by taking on the full responsibility of his actions. Paul showed Paul was facing his cactus head on and ready to hug it.

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<sup>47</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Acts 26: 9,11, ESV.

<sup>49</sup> G. A. Krodel, *Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 459.

<sup>50</sup> Acts 26:15, ESV.

## Embrace the Ugly Parts of Your Soul

The next part of the cactus hugging journey specifically describes the metaphor of “hugging the cactus” as embracing the ugly parts of your soul. There is one obvious place in his writings where Paul directly uses language that echoes this metaphor, which is 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul describes his own often discussed “thorn in the flesh.” “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the volume of discussion on this topic ever since Paul coined this phrase, there remains no consensus on what Paul was actually referring to here. “The efforts that have been made to identify Paul’s ‘thorn’ are legion... the obscurity of Paul’s language have frustrated all attempts to solve this enigmatic problem.”<sup>52</sup> Many of the explanations offered to Paul’s thorn can be characterized by the following: “Now it is a probable and generally accepted view that the ‘physical weakness,’ which was the occasion why Paul preached to the Galatians was the same malady which tormented him at frequent intervals.”<sup>53</sup> Theories on Paul’s thorn as a physical ailment or malady include things like bad eye sight, migraines, and Ramsay who, “suggested that this malady was a species of chronic malaria fever.”<sup>54</sup> However, it is important to understand that Paul’s lack of clarity here has actually contributed to a broader appeal to his own personal experience, whatever it ultimately might have been. “In fact, had Paul revealed what his *skolops* (thorn) as, Christians of succeeding generations who lacked his particular

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<sup>51</sup> 2 Cor. 12:7, ESV.

<sup>52</sup> Harris, “Romans,” 396.

<sup>53</sup> Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 94.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 94.

affliction would have tended to find his experience irrelevant. As it is, countless believers have been helped by his reference.”<sup>55</sup>

Seeing the need for an explanation that goes deeper than a physical malady, the one offered here connects Paul’s thorn in the flesh with his own cactus hugging journey. Therefore, from the multitude or legion of possible explanations available, we are building on a handful of possibilities given by Wright. “A special nagging temptation that keeps coming back to bite him? A sorrowful conscience about his former violent life or his bitter public row with Barnabas?”<sup>56</sup> “Even the reoccurring nightmare stoning of Stephen, in which he himself is standing by giving his grim approval.”<sup>57</sup> The theory presented here is that these possible explanations when understood collectively, actually point to a deeper issue, Paul’s very own zeal, as the explanation for his thorn in the flesh and cactus to be hugged. Young Saul’s zeal is what drove him to violently persecute the church and stand in approval at the stoning of Stephen and not telling how many others. And even as Saul became Paul the Apostle, he almost certainly carried with him a sorrowful conscience and even nightmares regarding these violent actions for the rest of his life. That Paul’s zeal was a part of his personality and continued to help define him even after his encounter with Jesus has already been addressed. However, this point cannot be overstated in regard to making a connection between his zeal and the thorn in his flesh. Therefore, in regard to Paul’s own life-shaking experience, “We must look carefully to see what emerges, not only about the event itself, whatever it was, but about the way in which

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<sup>55</sup> Harris, “Romans,” 396.

<sup>56</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 316.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 70.



the 'zeal' of the eager young Torah student emerged in a different form as 'zeal' for which he called the 'good news.'"<sup>58</sup>

It is important to not reduce the zeal of Saul the Pharisee as simply negative or harmful and in turn the zeal of Paul the Apostle as always positive and beneficial. It's also key to remember here that Paul's own claim to Timothy as "chief of sinners," was not just a reflection of his life as Saul, but also a reflection of his ongoing reality as Paul. "Paul's self-designation remains valid, even though he has been fully absolved and saved by Christ. Christians do not cease to sin until the life of the world to come."<sup>59</sup> Paul's zeal, then did not stop causing harm in others or personal regret and sorrow as it emerged in a different form. If cactus hugging is embracing the ugly part of one's soul, then Paul's own zeal, when not kept in check, continued to be his cactus and thorn. It's worth noting here that "he never overcame his touchiness, his fussiness, or his arrogance. It seems likely to that the thorn in his flesh was anger rather than lust."<sup>60</sup> Paul's tendency to take his zeal too far, often manifesting in anger, and in doing so caused harm others was the special nagging temptation that kept coming back to bite him. This in no way is meant to minimize the countless positive, life changing, and even world altering realities that Paul's zeal influenced. Instead, Paul's zeal serves to remind us that, "in this life, we remain saints (people made holy through faith in Jesus) and sinners."<sup>61</sup> Throughout his life, Paul in his zeal continued to reflect both realities of this paradox.

In describing the thorn in his flesh Paul refers to it as "a messenger from Satan to harass me." This reference offers further insight into understanding the harm caused by Paul's zeal as

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 44.

<sup>59</sup> E.A Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2069.

<sup>60</sup> Ruden, *Paul Among the People*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Engelbrecht, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 2069.

his thorn. In the scriptures Satan is often presented as the accuser and it is important to note that. “The word ‘satan’ is the Hebrew term for ‘accuser,’ used popularly and often quite vaguely to refer to the dark power that appears to grip, distort and ultimately destroy human societies and individuals.”<sup>62</sup> The prophet Zechariah provides an example of this that Paul certainly would have been familiar with. “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.”<sup>63</sup> If Paul’s thorn was an accusation by a messenger or message from Satan sent to harass him, the ongoing damage caused by Paul’s zeal was the very accusation that would have caused him the most anguish. This thorn was clearly a source of great pain and anguish for Paul for he acknowledged that, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.”<sup>64</sup>

The manner in which the close friendship and ministry partnership with Barnabas came to an abrupt end over John Mark, serves as an example of Paul’s zeal rearing its ugly head and causing damage to others. Here as in other places, “Luke does not spare Paul’s blushes... when it came to reconciliation, Paul must always have had a sense of shame and failure. He and Barnabas had a falling out.”<sup>65</sup> That this event in Paul’s life has been offered by Wright and others as a possible source of his thorn in the flesh gives some idea of its significance in his life. “Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought it best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 108.

<sup>63</sup> Zech. 3:1, ESV.

<sup>64</sup> 2 Cor. 12:8, ESV.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 171.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 15:37–39, ESV.

That Mark had let down both Paul and his relative Barnabas by leaving them in the middle of their previous missionary journey was not in question. However, when it came time for their return trip the young Mark felt ready to rejoin them and this became the source of the conflict. Barnabas, with his good reputation as an encourager, “pleaded for a little encouragement in the case of John Mark, arguing perhaps that people are at least as important, if not more, than tasks that must be performed. But Paul thought John Mark unfit for the task.”<sup>67</sup> Here Paul’s over zealousness for the task, even the important task of being the Apostle to the Gentiles, blurred his judgement and exposed his cactus, or ugly part of his soul. Paul was certainly not the only one at fault here as this “was what Luke calls a *patxysmos*: a blazing, horrible, bitter row. Nobody came out of it well... leaving not only a bad taste in everyone’s mouth, but also a sorrowful memory.”<sup>68</sup> The severity and damage caused by this conflict should not be minimized just because, “From Luke’s point of view this quarrel did not hinder the spread of the gospel. On the contrary, instead of one mission outreach there now would be two.”<sup>69</sup> While this conflict was at least in part redeemed, as was at least the relationship between Paul and Mark as we will address later, this no doubt served as a powerful reminder to Paul of the damage his zeal was capable of causing. By acknowledging his thorn in the flesh, understood here as the negative side of his zeal, Paul was hugging the cactus and embracing the ugly part of his soul. In doing so, despite Paul’s ongoing many shortcomings, “he kept his worse faults in bounds, sometimes with charming irony, and the knowledge of how destructive they could be was of great use to him in his work.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Krodel, *Acts*, 294–295.

<sup>68</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Krodel, *Acts*, 295.

<sup>70</sup> Ruden, *Paul Among the People*, 26.

### **Do This Long Enough and Gain Some Humility**

The next part of the cactus hugging journey is a commitment to embracing the ugly parts of the soul long enough to become a person of humility. As we are already seeing in Paul, this is not a quick fix, but instead is a lifetime pursuit of hard personal work. But as we are also seeing in Paul, this eventually can lead to becoming a person of at least “some” humility. As we have already addressed, before he became Paul, Saul spent 13 years in Arabia and Tarsus unpacking the implications of what happened to him during his encounter with Jesus. The words of Jesus from that day, “Paul, why are you persecuting me” would have been ringing in his ears and the faces of all those that he persecuted permanently imbedded in his memory. For, “By his own repeated account, Paul’s first relation to the young Christian movement was that of a persecutor.”<sup>71</sup> Again, this would have been a lot for anyone to process, even someone with the zeal and determination of Saul. He made the commitment to hug the cactus, embracing the ugly side of his zeal for as long as it might take to make sense of his new reality and start gaining some humility. Part of this commitment likely included a significant amount of time in the reflective disciplines like prayer and meditation, which makes Sinai as his ultimate destination in Arabia all the more plausible. Saul was indeed gaining some humility in the process. “We discover from the Arabia journey something about Paul’s own self-awareness, including at that point a perhaps welcome note of self-doubt in the midst of the zeal.”<sup>72</sup> Saul came out of this time a different, humbler version of himself. Yes, the same zeal that drove him to Arabia and back home to Tarsus to sort things out in the first place, would continue to show

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 69.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 64-65.

up again as his thorn and cactus to hug. Yet, his rough edges were starting to smooth out; “we cannot imagine that in this early period he ever stopped thinking things through, soaking that reflection in Jewish-style prayer, and... engaging with the culture all around him.”<sup>73</sup>

This idea of becoming a person of humility over time brings us back to Paul and his thorn in the flesh. Paul clearly understood that the development of his own humility was a purpose of the thorn, as his description of the thorn is book-marked by the phrase, “to keep me from becoming conceited.” Therefore, he was offering an honest assessment of his own need for humility to keep his zealous pride in check. “The middle voice implies reflective action on the part of the Apostle; hence, it may be rendered, that I may not overestimate myself, or, in other words fall into the sin of spiritual pride. From this danger not even a man like St. Paul was exempt.”<sup>74</sup> From his days as a zealous Pharisee, through his falling out with Barnabas, and beyond, a gifted and driven man like Paul would have been constantly vulnerable to letting his pride and conceit get the best of him. In describing his thorn, the zealous Paul made it clear that it was very painful and that he wished it to be taken from him. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”<sup>75</sup> Yet, in the answer he did receive it became clear to Paul that the thorn was not going away; it remained as a reminder for him to keep embracing that ugly part of his soul. Paul was continuing to learn how to leave out Jesus’ invitation to the 12 to deny himself, pick up his cross and follow him. This led Paul to further comment, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of

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<sup>73</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 70.

<sup>74</sup> H.E. Jacobs, G.F. Spieker, and C.A. Swensson, *Annotations on the Epistles of Paul to 1 Corinthians 7–16, 2 Corinthians and Galatians, Vol. VIII*, edited by H.E. Jacobs (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 320.

<sup>75</sup> 2 Cor. 12:8–9, ESV.

Christ may rest upon me.”<sup>76</sup> Some 23 years or so after Saul’s encounter with the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus, and ten years after his time of reflection in Arabia and Tarsus, Paul was continuing to gain “some humility,” and yet he still had plenty more to gain along the way.

Humility was also a key topic in the letters Paul wrote to instruct and encourage others. One example of this can be found in his letter to the Philippians, one of the most positive and encouraging of his letters. Here he reminds the believers gathered in Philippi of the need to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”<sup>77</sup> Paul knew all too well the importance of humility as he personally carried the pain from the damage caused out of his own zeal driven selfish ambition. Paul the Apostle and Pastor was concerned for the unity of the church and in writing these words of caution hoped to spare them from the divisions and conflicts often caused by self-interests and conceit. “Humility hardly means being a doormat (Paul obviously was not!); but is instead the willed act of challenging one’s own sense of giftedness when it threatens to divide the community.”<sup>78</sup> Here it is important to understand that Paul’s zeal was part of his giftedness, as it was the very thing that drove him to accomplish many great things and literally change the world as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Yet, when his zeal was unchallenged, it became his thorn and cactus, causing much damage and division along the way. In Paul this was evident that in that while, “meekness was a distinctive feature in the character of Jesus, but its reproduction in Paul required the taming of his impetuousness.”<sup>79</sup> The naturally zealous Paul then had to learn to

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<sup>76</sup> 2 Cor. 12:9, ESV.

<sup>77</sup> Phil. 2:3–4, ESV.

<sup>78</sup> Krentz, *Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians*, 146.

<sup>79</sup> Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 460.

deny some of his self here and learn meekness, which was much more difficult for him, yet to his credit he did learn to do this over time. One of the reasons then, to hug the cactus or embrace the ugly part of the soul is to rein in its negative influence and limit its damage. By not only seeking personal humility, but also encouraging it in those that he was caring for pastorally, Paul demonstrated the reality that the benefits of cactus hugging are achieved over an extended amount of time.

### **Life Will Take on a New Meaning**

This brings us to the last part of the cactus hugging journey as laid out by Robert Downey Jr. Here Mel Gibson assured him that as he continued to hug the cactus his life would eventually take on a new meaning. When young Saul encountered Jesus, his life was given a radically new meaning. “But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you.”<sup>80</sup> Saul the zealous young Pharisee and persecutor of the church was to become Paul the zealous Apostle to the Gentiles. Yet, this new meaning and purpose took time to work out and become a reality in the life of Paul. For one, as we have already dealt with in some detail, Saul spent up to three years in Arabia and another ten back home in Tarsus sorting out his life and new calling. By the end of this time, “Saul had worked out in considerable detail what it meant that the One God had revealed himself in and as the crucified and risen Jesus. That meant a new dimension to his devotion, a new shape for his ‘zeal,’ a new

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<sup>80</sup> Acts 26:16–17, ESV.

depth to 'loyalty.'"<sup>81</sup> However, Paul's life continued to take on new meaning as he started to live out his new calling and purpose, with his cactus and thorn always a close companion.

That Paul's life continued to take on new meaning can be seen in concluding words in describing his thorn in the flesh. "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."<sup>82</sup> Paul wrote these words another ten years or so after leaving Tarsus to start living out his apostolic calling; and a good 23 years after receiving that calling from Jesus. In those ten years Paul had embarked on several missionary journeys, started numerous churches, and trained a whole generation of leaders, in the midst of facing all the above-mentioned challenges. And yet, "Paul would gladly boast about the things that exposed his weakness... rather than pray for the removal of the 'thorn' and its attendant weakness."<sup>83</sup> After 23 years of cactus hugging Paul learned to become content with and even embrace all the sources of weakness and in doing so his life had truly taken on new meaning.

### **Conclusion – It Worked**

After laying out these parts of the cactus hugging journey described by Robert Downey Jr., as given to him from Mel Gibson, he simply acknowledged that he did it and it worked. This chapter has engaged the parts of this cactus hugging journey as experienced in the life and teachings of Saul the zealous Pharisee who became Paul the equally zealous Apostle. The young Saul who would stop at nothing in persecuting the church, was confronted dramatically

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<sup>81</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 83.

<sup>82</sup> 2 Cor. 12:10, ESV.

<sup>83</sup> Harris, "Romans," 397.



with the reality that his life was not working. Yet as Paul learned how to embrace the ugly part of his soul his life took on new meaning and even contentment, “for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”<sup>84</sup>

Part of cactus hugging is to pay forward what has been learned. Downey Jr. referred to it as helping the next guy. In this light it is important to note that Paul spent a significant part of his work as an Apostle in helping, training, equipping, and serving others. Paul’s meeting with the Ephesian Elders on his way to Jerusalem is a great example of him living these out and helping the next guy(s). He knew this was almost certainly the last time he would see these brothers that he toiled with for three years, and “Paul is saying farewell and the speech has the flavor of a final testament.”<sup>85</sup> In this farewell address Paul did not shrink away from the challenges he faced while serving among them. “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me.”<sup>86</sup> Paul’s tone here and throughout this speech is reflective of someone whose hard edges and even zeal had softened over time. By hugging the cactus and embracing the ugly part of his soul he had become a man of humility and the new meaning in his life was there for all to see. After sharing his pastoral concern for the many challenges he knew were facing these brothers, he concluded by reminding them to follow Jesus’s own invitations to deny self and consider the needs of others first. “In all things I have

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<sup>84</sup> Phil. 4:11–12, ESV.

<sup>85</sup> Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 346.

<sup>86</sup> Acts 20:18-19, ESV.

shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Then, after prayers and without a dry eye among them Paul leaves them for good.

The life of Paul serves then as a powerful example of the parts of the cactus hugging journey being lived out. His own description of his thorn in the flesh contributes greatly to understanding cactus hugging theologically. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Paul is not unique as a Biblical character who lived out the cactus hugging journey. People as diverse as Jacob, Sampson, King Saul, Elijah, John Mark, and countless others journeyed from a self-imposed crisis to humility and a life of new meaning through embracing the ugly parts of their soul. This shows that followers of Jesus can embrace the ugly parts of their soul because they are, at least in part, there to humble us and remind us that God's grace is truly sufficient. Here we have seen through Paul's life and teachings that embracing the ugly part of one's soul can work as an effective approach to caring for both one's own soul and for the souls of others.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITTERATURE REVIEW

#### Invitation

Chapter Two began with the invitation from Jesus to deny the self, or as it is sometimes referenced, “die to” self. This was unpacked through the life of Paul who served as a Biblical example of the cactus hugging journey. In transitioning from looking at cactus hugging from the Biblical and theological perspectives to the literature review this same invitation might be better expressed as dying to “ego.” In psychoanalysis the ego is understood as, “the part of a person's mind that tries to match the hidden desires (= wishes) of the id (= part of the unconscious mind) with the demands of the real world.”<sup>1</sup> This attempt to match one’s hidden desires with the many demands of the real world often fails as, “the voices of the ego will always be totally for or totally against because they are tiny and insecure voices.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the cactus hugging journey involves, in part, gaining a fuller sense of self by moving beyond these tiny and insecure voices that often fuel the personality or sense of self in an unhealthy way. This eventually leads to one’s life, or at least a part of one’s life, not working. However, the story does not have to end there, as a life that is not working can become a life that takes on new meaning.

As we become less identified with our personality, it becomes a smaller part of the totality of who we are. The personality still exists, but there is a more active

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<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, “ego,” [dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/ego](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/ego), accessed August 15, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2001), xxi.

intelligence, a sensitivity, and a Presence underlying it that uses the personality as a vehicle instead of being driven by it.<sup>3</sup>

### **Cactus Hugging in Three Traditions/Concepts**

In this chapter the parts of the cactus hugging journey will be unpacked through the lenses of three traditions or concepts. Again, hugging your cactus is being defined in this thesis-project as: When one's life is not working due to a self-imposed crisis, embrace the ugly part(s) of your soul long enough to become a person of humility and for life to take on new meaning. Embracing here is understood as both loving this part of self for it is not going away and yet seeking to rein it in and limit its damage. The first of these is the well-respected "12 Steps" movement demonstrated by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous which started in the United States in the 1930's. Anyone with even a casual knowledge of the 12 Steps movement will notice that the parts of Downey's speech have some striking similarities to the ideas developed within in the twelve steps themselves. It's quite possible, even likely, that Gibson actually had the 12 Steps in mind as he was originally sharing the cactus hugging journey with his hurting friend. The benefits and contributions of the various twelve step groups cannot easily be overstated as they have literally saved the lives of millions of people by helping them find real healing through a variety of addictions. However, there are many whose "cactus" includes battling a less public or visible addiction than alcohol, drugs, or an eating disorder, and may not seek the help available to them through the 12 Steps. For example, in my own life I have personally known many people who have benefitted from being a part of a twelve-step

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<sup>3</sup> Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram: The Completed Guide to Psychological and Spiritual Growth for the Nine Personality Types* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 30.

program. Yet when I started to work through my own addictions of chaos, adrenaline and seeking attention, I found that these didn't seem to fit into one of the existing 12 Step groups. I was still facing the reality that, "we are all addicts... a modern name and honest description for what the biblical tradition called 'sin' and medieval Christians called 'passions' or 'attachments.' They both recognized that serious measures or practices were needed to break us out."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the healing approaches developed by twelve steps can benefit anyone trying to break out of the pain of their own addictions and personal brokenness.

Another concept worth considering in relation to cactus hugging is the Enneagram of Personality, which is a nine-sided geometric model based on nine "types" or ways in which an individual engages their ego, the world, and people around them. The origins of the Enneagram itself is ancient and very much so shrouded in mystery. However, the Enneagram of Personality is actually much more recent, having its origins in the 1960's and 1970's; first in the work of Oscar Ichazo in Chile, and then Claudio Naranjo who brought Ichazo's ideas to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Many people are at least familiar with one or more of the myriads of personality tests and profiles that are out there. The Enneagram in its modern form relates well to the cactus hugging journey because it does much more than simply describe one's personality. It also, "illustrates the nine ways how we get lost, but also the nine ways we can come home to our true self.... It explains the 'why' of how we think, act, and feel.... It helps us come to terms with our gifts as well as the addictive patterns."<sup>6</sup> I experienced this reality in a profound way as I was working through my own Enneagram "type," which happens to be "the

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<sup>4</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> A good description of this can be found at: The Enneagram Institute, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/the-traditional-enneagram>.

<sup>6</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 25.

seven” commonly known as the “enthusiast” or “epicure.” The nine types of the Enneagram are organized further into “triads” (groupings of three), with each type understood as either being centered in either the head, heart, or body/gut. My type, the enthusiast, is considered the most energetic, which came as no surprise given my addiction to chaos and adrenaline. However, the source of this energy was not what I expected; “sevens the most energetic of all the Enneagrams types, are a source of imagination and freedom in the world..., but sevens are actually rooted in the Head Center.”<sup>7</sup> Once I realized that I am not body centered many of my patterns of behavior started to make more sense. It’s actually my mind that is going so fast and my body is often just trying to keep up. In response to this reality I have started to learn how to quiet my mind by reducing the noise in my life. This has in turn also slowed my body down leading to overall less chaos and adrenaline.

The last significant concept related to the cactus hugging journey involves the spiritual tradition often referred to as contemplative prayer. The often-painful parts of the cactus hugging journey simply cannot be worked through without doing deep personal and spiritual soul work. “Contemplation waits to discover what this ‘I’ consists of. What is this ‘I’ that I am trying to shore up and expand? Who is this this self I take so seriously? To discover the answer we have to wait and observe.”<sup>8</sup> This waiting and observing means integrating the deep work of prayer, meditation and contemplation into the cactus hugging journey. This includes engaging in spiritual activities like silence, solitude, stillness, and emptying that are directly related to personal healing and discovering a life of new meaning. One example of this is the mystical

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<sup>7</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1999), 75.

tradition known as “The Dark Night of the Soul” from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, St. John of the Cross, and his seminal works *the Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*. When I first engaged the video where Downey described “hugging the cactus” I almost instantly related it to The Dark Night of the Soul. Since then the concept of “the dark night” has become my own constant companion during my own cactus hugging journey. One way in which St. John of the Cross’s idea of Dark Night of the Soul helped me in my own journey was in realizing that, “he (St. John) is addressing something mysterious and unknown, but by no means sinister or evil. It is instead profoundly sacred and precious; the secret way God not only liberates us from our attachments, but also brings us to the realization of our true nature.”<sup>9</sup> This helped me realize that I had a tendency to see all darkness as bad and to be avoided. Yet here darkness is understood as also meaning going deeper spiritually, taking the time to finally face painful and difficult realities for the purpose of healing and liberation.

The Franciscan Richard Rohr is the primary guide for this chapter, although I will be interacting with a variety of authors from different backgrounds. I chose Rohr because he has written on all three of the above traditions. I have personally found his writings to be helpful in unpacking my own cactus hugging journey. However, it is worth noting here that Rohr is not without his critics, particularly from the evangelical community regarding some of his theological approaches and writings. A good example of this can be found in this summary in a recent article on Rohr.

It is very sad that this priest Richard Rohr, who in principle had good intentions (he did not want dead dogmas, but real experience of what God had intended), but by his own philosophy with halve truths has yet been so seriously misled and

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<sup>9</sup> Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 67.

has been misleading many other people. Justifiably, he wants to get rid of a dry dogmatic which has no life in it and he longs for the spiritual life which God has intended. But he unfortunately has fallen into the New Age pitfall that says that every man is divine and needs no Savior. Rohr completely ignores the way that the Bible points out.<sup>10</sup>

This writer is among many who I have found that warn Biblically minded Christians to avoid Rohr's teachings altogether. However, despite my own disagreement with Rohr, I still have found that his literary contributions to be very useful here. It is important to note that Rohr is being engaged with here for his work within these three traditions and not as a theologian.

### **When Life is Not Working, Don't Give up Hope**

In his speech about "hugging the cactus" Robert Downey Jr. began with an acknowledgement that his life was not working, and that that his friend Mel Gibson intervened to help him down a path towards a life of new meaning. The first piece of advice that Gibson gave him was to not give up hope even in midst of some very serious challenges. This is an important reminder that no one can go through this journey alone; we all need people and other tools to help us along the way. As one realizes that their life isn't working, the Enneagram can be a very helpful tool in identifying the cactus or ugly part of their soul; or how they got lost in their false self or "glittering image" in the first place and how they can come back home to their true self. Identifying the cactus is not the same as learning to truly embrace it, which will almost certainly take longer. However, identifying this ugly part of self is the essential first step towards healing and a life of new meaning. When a person's life isn't

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<sup>10</sup> Piet Guijt, translated by Ursula Moestapa, "New Age in the Church – The Deceptive Theology of Richard Rohr," accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.stichtingpromise.com/new-age-in-the-church---the-deceptive-theology-of-richard-rohr.html>.



working there is almost certainly a discernable pattern of behavior that has over time led to that moment of crisis. Yet, in that moment of crisis it is very hard to have the objectivity to connect the dots and see this pattern clearly. Here, taking the time to learn one's type can be helpful because, "it's a matter of inner work that can lend authentically to our spiritual path. At the same time the Enneagram creates new difficulties... for the Enneagram shows us, among the other things, the dark side of our gifts."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, one's cactus can very likely be found in working through the negative qualities and patterns of behavior related to their Enneagram type. For example, the Enneagram type one is often referred to as the "reformer" or "perfectionist" and the negative qualities of this type tend to include things like being arrogant, unforgiving, dogmatic, critical and even obsessive. Having spent the last chapter on Saul who became Paul, there should be no surprise that the zealous Paul is considered by many as a great example of a one. Paul certainly does come across as being at the least, "a little arrogant and dogmatic. He was a Pharisee; ONE's are born Pharisees. God transformed his root sin and made a gift of it. He used a zealous Pharisee, who managed to become a zealot for the Gospel."<sup>12</sup> As was demonstrated in detail the previous chapter, these negative qualities led to Saul's crisis of facing the ugly part of his soul and continued with Paul, throughout his transformation into a life of new meaning.

At this first stage in the cactus hugging journey one can only hope to experience this kind of life-changing transformation. For facing the cactus and dying to the ego involves exposing what is also understood as the state of ego deficiency.

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<sup>11</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 58.

This state of ego deficiency, which can feel like a sense of being valueless, worthless, small, and weak, of feeling completely helplessness, impotent, inadequate, ineffective and suspended without support, forms the deepest layer and therefore the deepest experience of the personality.<sup>13</sup>

This is why the importance of what Downey Jr. referred to as, “not to give up hope,” cannot be overstated here. Facing this level of deficiency can very easily lead anyone to despair.

Therefore, leaning into the hope that things can and will get better is essential. It is also important at this stage to understand that this is not a quick fix, for the cactus hugging journey is something that must be committed to for the long haul. However, “the Enneagram, like the Spirit of truth itself, will always set you free, but first it will make you miserable! So, don’t bail out in the miserable stage, as many fearful church people do.”<sup>14</sup> Hope remains essential in this miserable stage because hope keeps reminds us that, while this stage is necessary, it is not meant to be permanent.

The spiritual tradition of contemplative prayer includes disciplines like stillness, silence, and solitude that help create the space for one to process and unpack the cactus hugging journey. Leaning into these disciplines that promote rest and space for healing are particularly important in this first part of this journey as, “it takes every bit of strength we have gained in that resting to stand firm in the midst of the storm that is created by these first glimpses of ourselves as we really are.”<sup>15</sup> As mentioned before, there are a lot of parallels between cactus hugging and what is often referred to as a dark night of the soul, based on St. John of the Cross’s iconic work *Dark Night of the Soul*, which remains hugely influential some four centuries

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra Maitri. *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram: Nine Faces of the Soul* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 2000), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Barton, *An Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, 99.

later. Even in acknowledging the spiritual challenges of the dark night, St. John gives reason for hope to those in the midst of it. “God leads into the dark night those whom He desires to purify from all these imperfections so that he may bring them farther onward.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense then, both cactus hugging and the dark night can be understood as processes of purification for the soul. The purification of the soul is never easy; it is perhaps the most difficult part of soul care. However, it can provide the hope that things can get better, especially when one first faces the reality that a part of their life is no longer working. While not losing hope is important throughout the cactus hugging journey, it is of particular significance at the beginning, as one is facing the pain and sense of loss associated with the reality that their life is not working. Part of maintaining hope then, is to accept and even embrace that this season of loss and pain is for a greater purpose. Therefore, one must remember, “this is not forever; there is a light and you will see it. This isn’t all there is. Trust. Don’t try to rush through it; we can’t leap over our grief work. Nor can we skip over our despair work. We have to feel it.”<sup>17</sup> True healing and new meaning occurs in trusting that this sense of despair is not forever and that there is a light to be found in the current darkness. This connection between these spiritual disciplines and personal crisis can be seen in the life and writings of the reformer Martin Luther. “Prayer, meditation, and spiritual trial became the shorthand used by the mature Luther for theological or lived theology.”<sup>18</sup> Luther’s own personal struggles are well-known and documented. Yet, Luther understood that these realities were not in any way unique to him. To Luther, “struggle or

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<sup>16</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Coppell TX, 2019), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon L. Isaac, *Prayer Meditation & Spiritual Trial: Luther’s Account of Life in the Spirit* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 5.

spiritual trial comes to every person in one form or another in this life... Just about the time one is settled and feeling secure, something dire takes place.”<sup>19</sup>

This hope is somewhat ironically found not in gaining, but in letting go of control. The “ego” or “shadow” part of self wants to be in control and will avoid the very things that promote healing. If we avoid self and ego, “we avoid darkness, we avoid tension, spiritual creativity, and finally transformation. We avoid God, who works in the darkness – where we are not in control. Maybe that is the secret: relinquishing control.”<sup>20</sup> This hope found in letting go and giving up control is key to the connection between cactus hugging, the dark night, and the 12 Steps. The number of people that have benefitted from the work of the 12 Steps is almost impossible to quantify. Yet, “to date, the most effective addiction treatments rely upon the twelve-step model originally developed in the 1930’s as Alcoholics Anonymous. The first three of these steps are strikingly reminiscent of the language of the dark night.”<sup>21</sup> These first three steps being:

1. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.”
2. “We had come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”
3. “We had made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.”

These first three steps are all about surrender, dying to self and ego. In his speech on “hugging the cactus,” Downey Jr. admitted that he could not get sober, or overcome his own addictions. Yet in this, he was also encouraged to not give up hope and start looking beyond himself. The cactus hugging journey is a spiritual journey that causes

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<sup>19</sup> Isaac, *Prayer Meditation & Spiritual Trial*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 160.

one to die to ego and look beyond self. This is because, “spirituality points always beyond: beyond the ordinary, beyond possession, beyond the narrow confines of the self, and – above all – beyond expectation.”<sup>22</sup> This going beyond self can be a source of great hope, especially when it helps one to start looking forward, beyond one’s own current circumstances. The concept of repentance, or changing direction, is important here, especially, “in the context of reforming one’s outlook in order to avoid making the same mistakes again in the future. Taking steps in a different direction, seeing the world with new eyes, starting over... these are the important features of repentance.”<sup>23</sup> In dying to their ego and letting go of false/shadow self and past failures, a person can find hope in a new direction and new meaning for their life. It’s important to note here a common misunderstanding about hope that the noted author Brené Brown observed.

Like most people, I always thought of hope as an emotion – like a warm feeling of optimism and possibility. I was wrong. I was shocked to discover that hope is *not* an emotion; it’s a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process.<sup>24</sup>

This means that in hugging your cactus one can move past [their](#) emotions and choose to be hopeful, while also taking practical steps towards true hopefulness. “So, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kurts and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Meletios Webber, *Steps of Transformation: An Orthodox Priest Explores the Twelve Steps* (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2003), 93.

<sup>24</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, (Center City: Hazelden Publishing, 2010, 2020), 87.

Brown is interacting with the work of C.R. Snyder, the former researcher at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 88.

## Find a Faith Rooted in Forgiveness

When Robert Downey Jr. shared the cactus hugging metaphor, he made it clear that Mel Gibson advised him to find faith, specifically a faith rooted in forgiveness. Mel Gibson's own personal struggles and trials have been well documented as has his faith as a Roman Catholic. This faith was dramatically shown in the 2004 movie he helped make "The Passion of the Christ" about the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. In this film he only made a brief cameo personal appearance, but it speaks deeply to his faith. "Gibson's hand is seen putting the nail into the palm of Christ as he's crucified, according to fan sites for the movie... The gesture is 'symbolic of the fact that [Gibson] holds himself accountable first and foremost for Christ's death.'"<sup>26</sup> This is important because the same Gibson who urged Downey Jr. to find a faith rooted in forgiveness, understood that he was personally responsible in Christ's death on the cross which is also the source of his own forgiveness.

This connection between faith and forgiveness is essential in the cactus hugging journey, as one begins going down the path of letting go of the false sense of self or ego. Here the more psychoanalytical invitation to die to ego intersects directly with the spiritual invitation from Jesus to die to self. In chapter two we demonstrated how this played out in the cactus hugging journey of the Apostle Paul, however this connection has also been important in my own personal journey and would be a key component for others to consider as well. Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM, where he serves as the director, have used the Enneagram extensively in helping individuals experience personal

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<sup>26</sup> Jeannette Walls with Ashley Pearson, "Gibson makes act of contrition in *Passion*: Actor-director lends a hand in his controversial movie about Christ's crucifixion," Jan. 6, 2004, 1:35 AM CST, accessed online 9/19/22, <https://www.today.com/popculture/gibson-makes-act-contrition-passion-wbna3881874>.

restoration and transformation. He refers to it as an “amazing tool to lead people into such liminal space-where finally God can get at them. Because the imperial ‘I’ is out of the way. Our seeing and our hearing need to include, forgive, and reconcile what the rest of the world rejects, dismisses and punishes.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, as the ego diminishes one naturally becomes more open to others, giving and receiving forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation. It is fair to acknowledge here that faith, including the Christian faith, does not always promote forgiveness and reconciliation as it should. Sadly, for many the “childhood wound” or crisis that helped create the ego in the first place comes from a faith tradition rooted more in legalism and fear than forgiveness. Yet, a faith that promotes and gives the space for forgiveness, also helps facilitate the journey away from the false sense of self back to one’s true self or essence. “Our shadow – and we all have one – is the part of our ego we are unable to consciously recognize... It is where we unconsciously ‘park’ some of the worst of ourselves – destructive patterns, addictions, or other seemingly unpresentable parts.”<sup>28</sup> Eventually, these worst parts of self start to come out of the unconscious and rear their ugly heads, and this can often be the source for one’s life not working at the beginning of the cactus hugging journey. Just as the Enneagram can help one discover their cactus or ugly part of their soul, it can also help them better understand their need for faith and forgiveness. Rohr often refers to the Enneagram as “nine face of the soul,” and I think this is very helpful in understanding it as more than just a set of nine type, numbers or even personalities. Instead, “all nine types are “fallen men and women” and in need of redemption to become all the more what they already are in the heart

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<sup>27</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Heuertz. *The Sacred Enneagram*, 52.

of God. No type is better or worse than the rest. All nine are in need of redemption.”<sup>29</sup>

However, learning one’s type can and will help in better understanding why the specific areas in need of forgiveness and redemption seem to follow certain patterns. For example, each type has its own passion or drive that dictates much of what they do. For my type, the seven or enthusiast, the passion is gluttony. However, “the overindulgence is not limited to what he eats. His voracious appetite could be for ideas, stories, books, drugs, food, drink, or anything that turns him on. It could also be for attention.”<sup>30</sup> For my own cactus journey, this voracious appetite for things, especially attention, and tendency towards overindulgence, when unchecked also represents my own personal areas in need of redemption and forgiveness.

This connection between faith and forgiveness is also found deeply in the spiritual tradition of contemplative prayer. St. John of the Cross understood how essential faith was in understand the process he called “dark night of the soul.” “Even so is faith with respect to the soul; it tells us of things which we have never seen or understood, either in themselves, or in aught that resembles them since they resemble them naught at all.”<sup>31</sup> The dark night, like cactus hugging, brings the soul to new things to be seen and understood that often don’t resemble anything experienced before. Much of this includes letting go of and receiving forgiveness for the various sensory attachments that have slowed or even prevented the transformation of our souls. In this, “the process of the dark night eases the restraints our attachments place on us, enabling us to live more fully and lovingly. It deepens our trust in God’s presence and in the essential goodness of life and ourselves. It leaves us emptier.”<sup>32</sup> Yet,

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<sup>29</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Maitri, *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram*, 238.

<sup>31</sup> St. John of the Cross, tr. E. Ellison Peers, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Westminster: Dover Publications, 2008), 70.

<sup>32</sup> May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 103.



this emptiness makes us better too as our faith and trust is free to rely less on the attachments of ego and more on God and in the essence created us to be. In this freedom we also learn through meditation and contemplation over time to trust in true forgiveness. “Forgiveness is God’s entry into powerlessness, as we see in his image on the cross. When we go into the Presence, we find someone not against us, but someone definitely *for* us!”<sup>33</sup> This is the essence of a faith rooted in forgiveness, trusting that we are not going through this journey alone. This was essential in Luther’s own unpacking of prayer, meditation, and spiritual trial. “First and foremost, Luther pronounces that it is precisely in the midst of inner conflict that God the Holy Spirit comes to work in our lives... But we also find Luther giving advice and creating scripts and a vocabulary of faith to aid believers who are in the midst of struggle.”<sup>34</sup> This cactus hugging journey is only possible with help from God and others, who walk along this journey with us.

This relationship between faith and forgiveness has been an important part of the 12 Steps tradition from the beginning. In Step 2 it is acknowledged that only, “a Power greater than ourselves could restore us.” When one’s life is not working the importance of simply having the faith that restoration remains possible is of great importance. The 12 Step tradition ties this faith in restoration to a power greater than one’s self, which starting in Step 3 is identified as “God, as we understood God.” Here it is important to understanding that in the cactus hugging journey one needs a faith to hold on to, faith that their lives can be restored and given new meaning, but only under the care of God as the power greater than self. A big part of this care from God then is found in forgiveness as, “anyone in need of mercy as much as

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<sup>33</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> Isaac, *Prayer Meditation & Spiritual Trial*, 9-10.

addicts are would surely need and meet a merciful God. If they fail to encounter this higher healing power the whole process grinds to a bitter halt”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, if one tries to embrace the ugly part of their soul without first having a faith that is rooted in forgiveness and mercy, it simply won’t work. This is because, “we can only show mercy if mercy has been shown to us. We can only live inside the flow of forgiveness if we have stood under the constant waterfall of needed forgiveness ourselves.”<sup>36</sup> The 12 Step tradition strongly acknowledges that, “Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From (resentment) stem all forms of spiritual disease.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, if one’s life is not working, there is a pretty good chance that resentment is at least part of the problem. Which is why forgiveness is critical, for forgiveness serves as the very cure for resentment, opening the door for healing. “In the absence of resentment, anger, fear, and sadness tend to heal each other... Denying fear and scorning the sadness that is shared, resentment refuses the possibility of growing through and beyond anger into forgiveness.”<sup>38</sup> For the cactus hugging journey of embracing the ugly parts of the soul to work as a model for the care of souls; resentments tied up in a knot of anger, fear, and sadness must be loosened by a faith rooted in forgiveness.

### **Take Personal Responsibility for Wrong Doings**

The next part of the cactus hugging journey according to Robert Downey Jr. via Mel Gibson was to take responsibility for his wrongdoings. Therefore, it is not only important to acknowledge the part of one’s life that isn’t working; it’s also essential to accept personal

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<sup>35</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 214-215.

responsibility for that reality. The Enneagram helps with this by exposing ones' patterns of sin, or wrong doings, and showing how, "our gift and our sin are two sides of the same coin. To meet your gift, you must, so to speak, chew, eat, and digest your sin. *Eat it, taste it, feel it, let yourself be humiliated by it!*"<sup>39</sup> This part of the cactus hugging journey is important because one must see how one's own choices, decisions, and patterns of behavior have negatively impacted their own life and the lives of those around them. However, this is not meant to bring a person to despair; instead, it actually works with forgiveness to give hope and faith that true healing and a life of new meaning is possible as we move from the sin to the gift side of the coin that is our self. "If we own and take responsibility for our darkness, if we feel how it has wounded ourselves and others... I promise that we will become alert to the other side, to our greatest gift... our gift is our sin sublimated and transformed by grace."<sup>40</sup> The Enneagram then helps one see and lean into the positive and helpful aspects of their personality "type" in contrast to the negative and damaging ones. Again, this is all in moving from the false or shadow "ego" that can often be described as a mask or "glittering image" towards our true essence and character. "Simply put, our character is the mask we wear... a mark of spiritual growth is when we stop polishing the mask and instead start working on our character. The Enneagram helps us do that character-structure work."<sup>41</sup>

The spiritual tradition of contemplative prayer is also helpful in taking responsibility for wrong doings. The cactus hugging journey towards true essence and character required time alone and time with God to process why one's life is not working. In the tradition known as the

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<sup>39</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 31.

dark night this type of soul work is often described as dry and arid, which ironically also happens to also be the very environment in which cacti flourish. “This is the first and principal benefit caused by this arid and dark night of contemplation; the knowledge of oneself and one’s misery.”<sup>42</sup> Facing oneself and misery that is self-inflicted is never easy, but is an essential part in taking personal responsibility for our wrong doings. Yet as one takes the time through meditation and contemplation to truly work on self they will agree that, “it is humiliating, after all, to find the freedom to say, ‘we have found the enemy and it is us.’... Perhaps this is the core meaning of ‘dying to self,’ as Christians and Buddhists use the term.”<sup>43</sup> Seeing oneself as the enemy or the reason for the misery they are experiencing is exhausting physically, spiritually and emotionally. This is why meditation and contemplation must include rest for, “it takes every bit of strength we have gained in that resting to stand firm in the midst of the storm that is created by these first glimpses of ourselves as we really are. Perhaps we glimpse an ego-driven self that is bent on control and image management”<sup>44</sup> Whatever one’s cactus, or ugly part of soul happens to be, it will always lead to thoughts, words, and actions for which the person feels guilt and shame over. The common term for this is sin, which brings us back to the importance of forgiveness. “The sins for which you cannot forgive yourself are the sins for which you will never be able to apologize. Such is the catch-22 of extreme guilt.”<sup>45</sup> A big part of learning to take responsibility then is recognizing that our guilt is often preventing us from forgiving our self and in turn taking personal responsibility. This can lead to what is often

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<sup>42</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 110-111.

<sup>44</sup> Barton, *An Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, 99

<sup>45</sup> Shozan Jack Haubner, *Zen Confidential: Confessions of a Wayward Monk* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2013), 113.

referred to as dread, “and it is important to remark that this guilt is real, it is not necessarily a mere neurotic anxiety. It is the sense of defection and defeat that afflicts a man who is not facing his own inner truth and is not giving back to life, God and to his own fellow man.”<sup>46</sup>

However, there is a purpose in all this guilt and dread associated with taking the time through mediation and contemplation to really face one’s self, warts and all. For, “this deep dread and night must then be seen for what it is: not as punishment, but as purification and grace.

Indeed, it is a great gift of God, for it is the precise point of our encounter with his fullness.”<sup>47</sup> It is in the taking personal responsibility that one can also receive the grace to move past guilt and dread, towards a life of new meaning and even patterns of behavior. When I was learning to take personal responsibility for my own cactus, the ugly parts of my soul being manifested in patterns of sin or wrong doings, I found the great hope in the example of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century English Mystic Julian of Norwich. In the midst of her own personal hardships Julian, “conceived a mighty desire to receive three wounds in my life: that is to say, the wound of very contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of steadfast longing toward God.”<sup>48</sup> This inspired me to consider what three “wounds” I might ask for to help in my own cactus hugging journey. These three wounds of humility, contentment, and being fully present have become my constant companions. In taking responsibility for wrongdoings, we all can learn to echo these words of Julian: “It behoved that there shall be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1969), 75.

<sup>47</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Julian of Norwich, Grace Warrack ed., *Revelations of Divine Love* (Digireads.com, 2013), 37-38.

<sup>49</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 60.

Taking personal responsibility for wrongdoings is deeply embedded into the teachings and practices of the 12 Step tradition. Specifically steps 4, 5, and 8-10 all address this one way or another.

4. "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."
5. "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."
8. "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."
9. "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."
10. "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

One's cactus is the ugly part of the soul; the ongoing process of taking a moral inventory, admitting personal failures, and seeking to amend them when possible is essential to the cactus hugging journey. "As Jesus did with the demon at Gerasa, someone must say, 'What is your name?' (Luke 8:30). The problem must be correctly named before the demon can be exorcised. You cannot heal what you do not first acknowledge."<sup>50</sup> Dealing with the damage caused by acknowledged wrong doings and even patterns can be very difficult but is also necessary for real healing to take place. "It is often painful to recall or admit, yet this is also the grace of lamenting and grieving over how we have hurt others... Fortunately, God reveals our sins to us gradually so we can absorb what we have done over time."<sup>51</sup> This is a helpful reminder that the cactus hugging journey is not a quick fix and can only work over an extended period of time. The 12 Steps emphasis on making amends, not just admitting wrong doings, but actually doing something, is very helpful in understanding the cactus hugging journey. This is also closely

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<sup>50</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, xxiii.

<sup>51</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 69.

connected to a proper understanding of forgiveness. “Forgiveness, divine or human, does not remove responsibility for our actions. If we ignore the consequences of irresponsible actions by claiming or asking for unconditional forgiveness, then forgiveness loses its significance.”<sup>52</sup> This is where the practice of repentance can also be extremely helpful.

In repentance it is the aim to change oneself, not to change the rest of the world or to change the mind of God. In the Twelve Steps there is an explicit awareness that in any given situation in which there is a need for change, the person attempts to solve the problem by changing himself, not the rest of the world.<sup>53</sup>

As one takes personal responsibility for their wrongdoings by repenting and attempting to amend them, the ego or false self is exposed and its damage, both personal and external, begins to diminish to some extent. The cactus or ugly part of the soul has been acknowledged; now it’s time for it to be embraced so that the process of personal change can continue.

### **Embrace the Ugly Parts of Your Soul**

When Robert Downey Jr. laid out the cactus hugging journey as received from Mel Gibson he referenced the phrase ‘hugging the cactus’ specifically as embracing the ugly parts of your soul. As we have already seen, this ugly part of the soul can be referred to in a variety of ways including shadow side, false self, ego, imposter, glittering image just to name a few. The tradition of the Enneagram helps one face their cactus or ugly part, but also acknowledges that this is not an easy process. “How many of us want to face the very parts of ourselves that keep our Essence, our soul’s purpose for being, hidden?”<sup>54</sup> In order to face these ugly parts of self

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<sup>52</sup> Kurtz and Ketchum, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 224.

<sup>53</sup> Webber, *Steps of Transformation*, 94.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher L. Heuert, *The Enneagram of Belonging: A Compassionate Journey of Self-Acceptance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Thrive, 2020), 29.

one must learn to also embrace them, as they are not going anywhere. This embracing includes learning to love these ugly parts, because they are a fundamental part of self. However, it also includes learning to rein in and minimize their power; the damage they cause in ourselves and others. This creates a bit of a paradox as the first instinct is rid ourselves of them so we must ask, “Why do we feel they must be destroyed rather than welcomed and accepted? Could it be that we have failed to grasp what it means to belong, fully belong?”<sup>55</sup> In the cactus hugging journey, embracing the ugly part of the soul is then leaning into this paradox to find a true place of belonging. This means finding the right balance in life where the false self is both accepted, even loved as part of the overall self, but also reined in so the true self or essence can more fully develop. This is where understanding one’s personality type or face of the soul as expressed in the Enneagram can again be helpful. Here the Enneagram can serve to help one find this balance and live in healthy balance within their own individual paradox. For example, my type, the 7, has a fundamental desire to avoid pain, often at all costs. For me this has helped me understand my addiction to adrenaline and chaos as well as my need for attention. All of this serves to help me avoid pain and overcompensate with joy, but a joy that is not always integrated in a healthy way. I’ve had to learn in hugging my own cactus that, “joy should not come at the expense of the dark side of life, and banal idealism must not deny reality. Sober joy is joy in the face of and despite all the difficulties of life.”<sup>56</sup> For me this has meant leaning into the very things that I have spent a lot of my life avoiding. This has included surrounding myself with people that help me, “eat, chew, swallow, and digest their pain.

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<sup>55</sup> Heuertz, *The Enneagram of Belonging*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 155.



SEVENs have to perceive their dark side, slow down their lives, stop the continual chatter, and accept the part of their life that is hard and not beautiful.”<sup>57</sup>

The spiritual tradition of contemplative prayer also speaks into this idea of embracing the ugly parts of the soul. This requires a shift away from believing that life is primarily about one’s self. “Life is not about me; it’s about God, and God is about love. When we don’t know love, when we don’t experience love, when we experience only the insecurity and fragility of the small self, we become restless; we even become violent and hateful.”<sup>58</sup> Yet these ugly parts of self still must be embraced; both loved and reined in. Slowing down enough to pray and contemplate on such things, helps one see these ugly parts with more clarity. “Spiritual work doesn’t elevate us to a higher plane than other people: it gives us perspective on ourselves. And from this vantage point we occasionally glimpse ourselves behaving like total \_\_\_\_holes”<sup>59</sup> It’s from this place of fully embracing and facing the ugliest and darkest parts of the soul that true transformation can start to happen. However, to get there the pain of these discoveries must also be embraced. For, “I cannot discover my ‘meaning’ if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness! By meditation I penetrate the inmost ground of my life... but this penetration must be authentic.”<sup>60</sup> This means being brutally honest with one’s self which again can be very painful. This will lead one to let go of, or at the minimum reduce significantly, some previously deeply held ideas, behaviors and even relationships. The tradition of the dark night understands that this emptying process, “whether experienced pleurably or painfully, always involves relinquishment, some kind of loss... Thus,

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<sup>57</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 160.

<sup>58</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Haubner, *Zen Confidential*, 78-179.

<sup>60</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 47.

even when a dark-night experience is pleasant, there is still likely to be an accompanying sense of emptiness and perhaps even grief.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the sense of loss and even grief that happens as one has embraced the ugly part of soul should also be embraced, for it is all part of the transformative process. Cactus hugging is a painful embracing of the ugliest parts of self; there is simply no avoiding that reality, but the pain is for the purpose of a life of new meaning.

The 12 Steps also include this need to embrace the ugly parts one’s soul, especially in showing the importance of acceptance and surrender in the process of embracing. An example of this is, “Step 3 (Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God) on acceptance and surrender is quite succinct and cuts to the chase... Surrender will always feel like dying, yet it is the necessary path to liberation.”<sup>62</sup> In cactus hugging this very act of surrender opens the door to healing and liberation. However, for it to work one has to learn to accept the self fully, especially the ugly parts.

Alcoholics are not in A.A to escape themselves, but to accept themselves as they are – flawed, imperfect, wounded, alcoholic – and through the acceptance to be healed, to be made whole, by being integrated into the reality of their own reality. Healing means not the elimination but the embracing of imperfection, for only thus is it possible to find wholeness.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, cactus hugging is about fully integrating the ugly parts of the soul into a fuller and holistic sense of self. This will cause these ugly parts to diminish, which is necessary, but again is also painful and also creates a sense of grief and loss. While addiction to a substance like alcohol, or a behavior like gambling or even adrenaline and chaos is deeply connected to one’s life not working; the addiction itself is not necessarily

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<sup>61</sup> May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 149.

of even likely the cactus, or ugly part of their soul itself. There is a deeper problem or brokenness, related to the false or shadow side of self that has over time turned into pain, often deep pain. The addiction then has actually become an attempted solution, though a destructive one, for that pain. This is why, “the alcoholic qualifies for everything that AA has to offer him, and the currency is pain – physical pain, pain of the heart, pain of living. In whatever form pain is the constant companion of the alcoholic.”<sup>64</sup> This is important in understanding cactus hugging as embracing the ugly parts of the soul. Here the 12 Steps can do more than just provide a process towards ending an addiction, they can also point one towards the underlying source of the pain, but also a path towards a healthy solution to it.

### **Do This Long Enough and Gain Some Humility**

In describing the cactus hugging journey Robert Downey Jr. was clear that Mel Gibson assured him that it would help him become a man of some humility, if he was able to hug the cactus long enough. Two very important realities then come from this part of the cactus hugging journey. For one, cactus hugging is a long-term commitment; one does not work through the ugly part of their soul that is at the root of their life not working overnight. The more likely is that it will be a lifetime pursuit of hard personal work. However, as one fully embraces the ugly parts of their soul and commits to doing this over time they will also become a person of at least “some” humility. One way to look at this part of the cactus hugging journey then is to understand it as shift in focus. The journey starts with admitting there is a cactus in

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<sup>64</sup> Webber, *Steps of Transformation*, 52.

the first place, or accepting that one's life, or at least a major part of one's life is not working. From there one invests in the behaviors of cactus hugging: not giving up hope, a faith rooted in forgiveness, taking personal responsibility for wrong doings, and embracing the ugly part(s) of their soul, the cactus itself. Doing this over a long enough period of time will lead to true transformation, which is first evidenced in humility, the focus of this part of the journey. Then, finally a life of new meaning, which is the focus of the last part. Therefore, the shift in focus here is that we start to see the tangible personal transformation, which is the ultimate goal of the cactus hugging journey.

The Enneagram here has been used in part as a way of helping one identify their cactus or ugly part of the soul. Yet this tool can only really be effective when used over time. It then, “describes the basic archetypes of humanity’s tragic flaws, sin, tendencies, primary fears, and unconscious needs. The understanding of these components, when shaped through contemplative practices, helps us wake up to our true selves.”<sup>65</sup> This is a great reminder that the benefits of using a tool like the Enneagram, require the time to personally reflect on things to actually work. It’s a messy process towards humility, and it’s helpful to not take one’s self too seriously along the way. “You have to live and deal for a while with the Enneagram until you press pass these external traits to the energy behind them. Humor will help here. To be able to laugh at yourself can be just as liberating as to cry.”<sup>66</sup> Here self-laughter can be understood as one of the first steps towards humility. One of the reasons that the cactus hugging journey takes so much time is that it also took a long time to get to the point where life

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<sup>65</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 24.

wasn't working in the first place. However, leaning into the flaws, sins, tendencies, etc. as related to one's type will work to, "show us a pattern in the shape of the unique loop of our type that keeps us stuck. This loop has always been with us, the circular pull to reconnect with our original goodness that gets knocked off course by our original sin."<sup>67</sup> If the process of getting stuck in the loop in the first place took time, then the process of getting unstuck and reconnected to one's essence will take a good deal of time as well. This getting unstuck over time leads to humility in, "learning how to be fully present within our bodies, our emotions, and our thoughts, and to experientially explore and inquire into what we find. Presence and inquiry, then are its cornerstones."<sup>68</sup> Since there are nine types or "faces of the soul" represented in the Enneagram, becoming a person of some humility will look somewhat different in each of these. For example, my type, the seven, struggles with contentment, slowing down, and simply being fully present in the moment. This has certainly described me as I have spent a lot of my life anticipating and chasing after the next exciting experience. As I have already confessed that when my life isn't working it looks like addiction to chaos, adrenaline, and a need for attention that can never be met. Yet, in hugging my cactus long I become a person of at least some humility who is learning to embrace that, "fulfillment is not the result of getting anything; it is a state of being that arises when we allow the richness of the present moment to touch us... understand that Being itself, pure existence, is pleasurable."<sup>69</sup>

It's in this part of the cactus hugging journey, the embracing the ugly parts of the soul long enough, that the impact of the tradition known as contemplative prayer can be most

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<sup>67</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Maitri, *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram*, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Riso and Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram*, 284.

influential. The time that it takes to gain humility is not just passive time. Instead, it is time actively spent investing in prayer and intentional contemplative reflection on one's life, especially its painful realities. "In other words spiritual work isn't always just "instructive" – it's also transformative, and this kind of transformation can get messy."<sup>70</sup> The messiness of transformative spiritual or soul work takes time to work through and "clean up." In doing this long enough one can also start to see them self from a new perspective.

As we move into a contemplative stance, it becomes clear that we determine by our internal dialogue... what we will see and what we won't see, what we pay attention to what we don't. This is why we have to clean the lens: we have to get our ego-agenda out of the way so we can see things as they are.<sup>71</sup>

However, in order for this new perspective to have its fullest impact, it also needs to reach to the deepest parts of self. "I penetrate the inmost ground of my life, seek the full understanding of God's will for me, of God's mercy to me, of my absolute dependence on him. But this penetration must be authentic. It must be something genuinely lived by me."<sup>72</sup> This authenticity is lived out over time and sometimes doesn't feel like spiritual progress at all. The tradition of the "dark night" recognizes this, "there are prolonged periods in spiritual direction, example, when it seems a person is becoming stagnated, making no progress. But spiritual 'progress' has some unique qualities. Especially in the dark night that is hidden."<sup>73</sup> Yet in all this, as one contemplates their cactus, embracing the ugly parts of the soul long enough, a person of some humility can start to emerge. This happens over time as one understands that "all of us are much larger than the good or bad stories we tell about ourselves... Strangely, your life is not

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<sup>70</sup>Haubner, *Zen Confidential*, 165.

<sup>71</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 47.

<sup>73</sup> May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 172.

about 'you.' It is a part of a much larger stream called God."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, becoming a person of some humility occurs over time, time spent in contemplation; reflecting on and accepting that their life is not primarily about them, but something so much bigger.

While there are numerous approaches to these spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and contemplation, it's worth noting a couple here in a little more detail. In the contemplative prayer tradition, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century monk Guigo II remains very influential. His approach was based on a ladder of four rungs.

One day when I was busy with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came to mind: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. These make up a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has a few rungs, yet its length is immense and wonderful, for its lower end rests on earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches the heavenly secrets.<sup>75</sup>

This practice remains commonly used today and is generally known as *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for the phrase "Divine Reading." To Guigo each of these four rungs has a function as they build on each other. "Reading is an exercise of the outward senses; meditation is concerned with the inward understanding; prayer is concerned with desire; contemplation outstrips every faculty."<sup>76</sup> While the ultimate goal in this approach is transformation and new insight through contemplation, Guigo also understood that this takes place only over the course of time and consistent practice, often with little if any immediate results. "The transformative events that occur in a life seeking God in meditation often do not occur during the times of meditation and prayer, rather... in the most unassuming moments of one's day to day life. But the point is that

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<sup>74</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 142.

<sup>75</sup> Guigo II, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Welch, *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 67-68.

<sup>76</sup> Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, 79-80.

if we are not practicing meditation these breakthroughs tend to not happen as often.”<sup>77</sup> This process, then supports the idea that the benefits of hugging your cactus like humility, requires doing it long enough. Luther’s own process of prayer, meditation, and spiritual trial has already been touched on in this chapter. However, here it is worth noting that his approach stood as an alternative to Guigo’s ladder. “Luther distinguished his own practice of spirituality from the tradition of spiritual formation he had experienced as a monk. That tradition followed a well-tried, ancient pattern of reading, meditation, and prayer. Its goal was ‘contemplation.’”<sup>78</sup> As demonstrated by Guigo’s own words his ladder takes one from earth on a heavenly ascent. Yet Luther had a different destination in mind. “The order here is significant, for unlike that traditional pattern of devotion, the spiritual life begins and ends here on earth.”<sup>79</sup> Luther’s earthly focus here can serve to help keep one grounded on the here and now, as they hug their cactus and embrace the ugly parts of their soul. This approach also assumes the reality of challenges and difficulties in a more direct way, which also assumes time to work.

These three terms describe the life of faith as a cycle that begins with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, concentrates on the reception of the Holy Spirit through meditation on God’s Word, and results in spiritual attack. This in turn, leads a person back to further prayer and intensified meditation. Luther, therefore does not envisage the spiritual life as a process of self-development but a process of reception from the triune God.<sup>80</sup>

The point here is not to force one to choose between these approaches or limit the options to these two. I have personally found both helpful in my own journey, as well as some others not mentioned here. Instead, it is to present these as options to consider as these practices of prayer, meditation, and contemplation require practice and experience to become truly

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<sup>77</sup> James Finney, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*. (New York: Harper One, 2005), 77.

<sup>78</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 15.

<sup>79</sup> Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace*, 16.



effective. It's also worth noting here that other practices exist and not all are specific to a Christian or another faith experience. For example, "other forms of meditation are designed to help people solve their personal problems. It is true that meditation can expand our ability to think laterally, imaginatively, and creatively so that we can make sense of our experiences and find solutions."<sup>81</sup> While this is not the goal of all forms of meditation, especially a faith focused or Christian practice, it can certainly help one sort things out and gain humility while hugging their cactus.

The tradition of the 12 Steps also understands that true humility occurs over time. The very structure of taking individuals through 12 very intentional steps communicates the idea that this a process that is going to take time and not a quick fix. Here the 12 Steps is similar to cactus hugging in that both require one to both confront and also embrace failure, the ugliest parts of self and even the soul. Yet, doing this over time creates the environment for true change and humility. In Step 4 one makes a "searching and fearless moral inventory" and then again, the same idea comes up again in Step 10: "continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." This could seem a bit much but, "law and failure create the foil, which creates the conflict, which leads to a very different kind of victory than any of us expected... Alcoholics after 30 years in perfect recovery are still imperfect and alcoholic, and they know it, which makes all the difference."<sup>82</sup> It's then this knowing, embracing, and even loving an imperfect self over time that allows one to become a person of some humility. Yet, it's very important to understand that the process of becoming a person of

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<sup>81</sup> Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace*, 111-112.

<sup>82</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 31-32.

humility remains ongoing; one does not simply achieve humility once and for all. The cactus is still there and the ugliness of one's imperfections still needs to be embraced. "That is why humility – the knowledge of our own imperfections – is so important, and this is why spirituality goes on and on, a never-ending adventure of getting to know ourselves, seeing ourselves clearly, learning to be at home with ourselves."<sup>83</sup> In Step 11 the importance of spiritual disciplines come into sharper focus in this transformative process, "sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him. Praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." Embracing the ugly parts of the soul over time leads to humility, in part because it allows one to go deep enough to start healing to fullest sense of self. Here we see an important overlap between the traditions of the 12 Steps and contemplative prayer.

It is the prayer of quiet and self-surrender that will best allow us to follow Step 11, which Bill W must have recognized by also using the word *meditation* when the word was not common in Christian circles at all at that time. And he was right, because only contemplative prayer or meditation invades, touches, and heals the *unconscious*! This is where all the garbage lies-but also where God hides and reveals.<sup>84</sup>

It's in this healing process of self-surrender, embracing the ugly that one finds some humility in cactus hugging and also a life of new meaning.

### **Life Will Take on a New Meaning**

This brings us to the last part of the cactus hugging journey as laid out by Robert Downey Jr. Here Mel Gibson assured him that as he continued to hug the cactus his life would

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<sup>83</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 193.

<sup>84</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 99.

eventually take on a new meaning. This life of new meaning is not something that just happens “all of a sudden” at this point of the journey. Instead, new meaning occurs and builds up throughout the process, yet it is here that one becomes most keenly aware that their life has taken on a new meaning.

The tradition of the Enneagram helps a person experience this life of new meaning by doing much more than helping them discover which one of nine types they happen to be. Instead, “we are invited to move beyond identifying our type toward putting this knowledge to work – to form a new identity, or perhaps more accurately, to reclaim our original identity... our unique path to spiritual growth, and this path is how we ultimately find our way home.”<sup>85</sup> This life that takes on a new meaning from cactus hugging; then will look a little different for each person, based in part on their type, but also how they uniquely veered away from their essence. In my own cactus hugging journey this meant overcoming the desire to constantly make things happen, “the invitation to Sevens is cooperation with God. Unredeemed Sevens think they are the fashioners of their own happiness, and so they continually seek new ways of optimizing their lives.”<sup>86</sup> For me this looked like a constant need for attention and addiction to chaos and my own adrenaline. Yet, as I hugged my cactus long enough and embracing the ugly parts of my own soul, my life found new meaning in the form of a healthier balance away from the extreme pursuit of happiness. “They confront the reality of the world, which is always a combination of joy and pain, and they accept both sides of life... capable of bringing joy and grief where grief reins... they actually go there and don’t evade this call.”<sup>87</sup> Instead of avoiding

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<sup>85</sup> Heuertz, *The Sacred Enneagram*, 166.

<sup>86</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 159.

<sup>87</sup> Rohr and Ebert, *The Enneagram*, 159.

situation that included pain and grief, I have learned to be present, content, and even helpful in them. In this this I have found not only new meaning as a person, but in my vocation as a pastor. I now more fully embrace all the aspects of this calling on my life.

The tradition of contemplative prayer contributes to a life of new meaning by teaching one to, “hold the realization, seeing the dark side of reality and the pain of the world, but we hold it until it transforms us... Once we can stand in that third spacious way, neither fighting nor fleeing, we are in the place of grace out of which newness comes.”<sup>88</sup> This new meaning then comes out of a transformative process that we are calling here cactus hugging. From here a world of new possibilities can emerge as one can see what they have to offer as they are part of something much bigger than they ever realized. “The gift that true contemplatives offer to themselves and society is that they know themselves as a part of a much larger Story, a much larger Self.”<sup>89</sup> This contemplative life of new meaning, of being a part of a bigger more spacious story will naturally lead to an outwardly growing care and concern for others. “Serious and humble prayer, united with mature love, will unconsciously and spontaneously manifest itself in a habitual spirit of sacrifice and concern for others that is unfailingly generous.”<sup>90</sup> The dark night of the soul also recognizes the centrality of love in this journey towards, new meaning. “This deepening of love is the real purpose of the dark night of the soul. The night helps us become who we are created to be: lovers of God and one another.”<sup>91</sup> A life of new meaning then from the cactus hugging journey will be evident in the love one habitually starts to show towards others.

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<sup>88</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 171.

<sup>89</sup> Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 52.

<sup>91</sup> May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 47.

There is perhaps no tradition more focused on a life of new meaning than the 12 Steps and its desire to end a life of addiction. A life of new meaning for the addict then turns upside down any sense of worthiness. “The absolute genius of the Twelve Steps is that it refuses to bless and reward what looks like any moral worthiness game or mere heroic willpower... the starting point, and in fact, the continuing point, *is not any kind of worthiness at all.*”<sup>92</sup> A life of new meaning then is found by seeing one’s sense of worthiness differently. In looking at the life of Paul last chapter, he found new meaning in his cactus or thorn in the flesh once he accepted that it wasn’t being removed and then concluded that, “when I am weak I am strong.” Paul, no doubt experienced healing and new life as he told this story time and time again and eventually even wrote it down. Here, a life takes on new meaning not just because of the experience itself, but also through the sharing and telling of that experience. “A.A. aims to convey experience rather than to ‘teach’ concepts. Always truthful to experience, the language of recovery makes it possible to see – and thus to understand – reality differently. And it’s in this different vision that spirituality begins.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, one’s life does truly take on a new meaning as they go through the actual experience of journeys like the cactus hugging. The lenses through which they view the world have changed.

### **Conclusion – It Worked**

After Robert Downey Jr. described and explained out these parts of the cactus hugging journey as given to him from Mel Gibson, he simply acknowledged that he did it and it worked.

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<sup>92</sup> Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 160.

Then, he added one little extra piece of advice, that in return for the help received, he should go on and help the next guy in some small way. In each of the three traditions covered in this chapter: the Enneagram, contemplative prayer, and the 12 Steps, there is a strong sense that they do not exist just for the person experiencing them. It could perhaps even be argued that all three primarily exist for the benefit of those around the person and by extension society itself. Therefore, one learns their Enneagram type not to just better understand themselves, but those around them, and why they behave as they do in their positive and negative patterns. One then engages in contemplative prayer to meditate and reflect on the deeper issues of their soul, especially those that bother them. Finally, one engages with the 12 Steps because a pattern of behavior has become addictive and made one's life not manageable. As this chapter on cactus hugging has shown, these three traditions can be integrated and work well together in helping one go from life not working, to investing in hope, faith rooted in forgiveness, personal responsibility and embracing the ugly parts of the soul. And if one does these, hugging their cactus long enough they can eventually become a person of some humility and a life of new meaning. Throughout this journey and especially towards its later parts, part of the transformation is found doing in paying it forward, helping "the next guy." Step 12 summarizes this idea well: "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." Again, this journey is both personal communal, both active and passive and both lived out and shared. "The 'language of recovery' works not because those telling their stories *describe* experiences of Release, Gratitude, and so on, but because in the very telling of their stories, they actually

experience those realities.”<sup>94</sup> All of this as one’s false, shadow, or wounded sense of self and ego is embraced and the essence is rediscovered. And when this happens hugging your cactus can work as an approach to soul care.

This self is smaller, in one sense, than the ego identity, because it does not need to be big in order to prove itself to the world. This self is truer, because it does not rely on image management to find acceptance in the world. This self is softer, because it does not rely on hardened defense structures to keep itself safe in the world. This self is freer, because it knows itself to be finally and ultimately held in a Love that is unchangeable and real.<sup>95</sup>

However, this embracing the ugly part of one’s soul, self, even essence creates somewhat of a paradox. Here, hugging your cactus is both learning to love, even nurture these ugly parts as they are not going away and yet at the same time trying to diminish them and their damage to self and others. This involves a healthy balance of accepting them for what they are without celebrating or promoting them in any way. Perhaps the best way to approach this to see cactus hugging as the process of integrating, neither shunning nor celebrating, these ugly parts into fuller sense of self. Each of the three traditions engaged in this chapter has brought a unique perspective to the cactus hugging journey. The Enneagram for example shows how the negative traits of a specific personality type can be used to help one identify and address their cactus or the source of their ugliness. Contemplative Prayer through engaging the related disciplines and practices like prayer, meditation, stillness, silence, and solitude; can help create the time and space one needs to process and unpack the parts of the cactus hugging journey. Finally, the 12 Steps have shown how certain addictive behaviors and patterns of behaviors are related to the self-inflicted crisis of one’s life not working. The 12 Steps also pointed to the

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<sup>94</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 160.

<sup>95</sup> Barton, *An Invitation to Silence and Solitude*, 113.

importance of community and telling one's story in the healing process. Interacting with these three traditions has further demonstrated how hugging your cactus, embracing the ugly part of ego can work as an effective approach to caring for both one's own soul and for the souls of others.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA COLLECTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

#### **Invitation**

In Chapter Two the cactus hugging journey was presented biblically and theologically as the invitation from Jesus to deny or “die to” self. This invitation was unpacked in the life and teachings of the zealous persecuting Pharisee Saul who also became the zealous Apostle Paul. Here Paul served as an example of the cactus hugging journey with special attention to his own thorn in the flesh. In Chapter Three this journey was presented with a slight shift in this invitation to deny or “die to” ego. Here the parts of the cactus hugging journey were unpacked through a literature review that integrated teachings and practices from three traditions: The Enneagram of Personality, Contemplative Prayer, and The 12 Steps. In both chapters this was accomplished by engaging six parts of the cactus hugging journey laid out in the speech by Robert Downey Jr. In this chapter the connection between these two invitations started to come together through the process of collecting data from my peers. The purpose of this data was to design a project that makes the metaphor of “hugging your cactus” accessible to people that could use it in caring for their own soul as well as caring for the souls of others. Helping people experience this cactus hugging journey of denying or (dying to) self or ego so that they may move from the false, shadow, or wounded self to discover a truer sense of self, essence, and meaning. This data collection also helped test my hypothesis that: the cactus hugging metaphor works as an approach to soul care. More specifically, when a person is responsible for their life, or a significant part of their life no longer working.

A better definition or understanding of soul care is helpful in understanding the data collection methods that helped to shape the project itself. “We can define soul care as the support and restoration of the well-being of persons in their depth and totality, with special concern for their inner life... The goal of such care can be described as fostering the psycho-spiritual growth of this inner-person.”<sup>1</sup> With that in mind the data collection for this thesis-project served to show how cactus hugging can help support and restore the brokenness of the inner-person, the very core of their being. For cactus hugging to work towards this end a person first needs to acknowledge that their life isn’t working. They also need to accept that their own actions and patterns of behavior have contributed significantly to why their life isn’t working. Finally, they must possess a sincere desire and willingness to actually get better. “Spiritual discipline opens up a space within, wherein a formerly unconscious pattern now becomes a choice: Do I really want to change? Can I turn the tide of bad habits? Or deep down am I secretly okay with being the same old high-end primate I’ve always been?”<sup>2</sup> Once an individual reaches this point then they can start embracing and integrating all parts of self, even the ugly ones. This is never easy because when we are honest we all must accept that, “while there are parts of myself that I have come to love and hold with compassion, there are parts of myself that are very, very difficult for me to accept.”<sup>3</sup> Yet that’s what hugging your cactus can do; over time it helps one embrace even those ugly parts that are difficult to accept.

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Benner, *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Haubner, *Zen Confidential*, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Heuertz, *The Enneagram of Belonging*, 29.

## **Data Collection**

The purpose of the data collection was to gather information that would help shape and develop the project part of the thesis-project. The method for this collection was initially conducted in a series of three focus groups to see how the ideas around cactus hugging resonated with those participating. In each group the parts of the cactus hugging journey were introduced to a group of five to ten professionals involved regularly in the care of souls. Each participant read and signed an “Informed Consent” form that is included in the Appendix. The process for the focus groups was laid out as follows.

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

1. You will watch a brief You Tube video of a speech given by Robert Downey Jr. where he shares the metaphor of “hugging the cactus.”
2. After the video you will have the chance to fill out a brief questionnaire to help summarize your thoughts regarding the six parts of the cactus hugging metaphor.
3. Finally, you will participate in a discussion group where you will be able to share your thoughts with others.

Each participant was also given a questionnaire, which can also be found in the Appendix. The first of the three focus groups was held in-person with a group of Lutheran pastors attending a prayer retreat on February 2, 2021 at Camp Lone Star in LaGrange, Texas. A total of ten participated, which made this the largest group. The second was a group of five DMin students from the October cohort at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. This was facilitated via Zoom on October 27, 2022. The third focus group was in-person at UT Southwestern Hospital in Dallas, Texas and was facilitated in-person on November 9, 2022. This group consisted of five chaplain students attending Clinical Pastoral Education training and one chaplain who served as their facilitator. For this focus group I was asked to provide a little more background

information, and a PowerPoint presentation called “Intro to Cactus Hugging,” was developed and shared for this purpose. A copy of this can also be found in the Appendix. Although the original plan was to only have three focus groups, a fourth was added that consisted of six pastors and chaplains that I personally invited to participate. This happened via Zoom on November 28, 2022. I shared the PowerPoint presentation with this fourth group as well. From the four focus groups I collected data from a total of 27 people who serve as soul care providers in a variety of contexts. Submitting the individual questionnaires was optional and a total of 20 were received. Each questionnaire was randomly assigned a number for reference purposes. The answers provided from the questionnaires and focus group provided a third way to interact with the six parts of the cactus hugging journey, this time with feedback from my contemporaries.

### **When Life Is Not Working, Don't Give Up Hope**

In both the focus groups conversation and questionnaires, the need to clarify what is meant by “Life not working” became a key focus here. In the focus groups conversations a general consensus developed that the cactus hugging metaphor seems to work best when one’s life is not working and the result is, “a self-imposed crisis due to bad choices and patterns of behavior.”<sup>4</sup> There was some concern here about how cactus hugging might apply if for example, “what if life isn’t working, but it’s not the person’s fault in situations like cancer or victims of abuse.”<sup>5</sup> Again there was a lot of agreement here that even the idea of one’s cactus being the ugly part of their soul suggests that the crisis or life not working comes from within.

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<sup>4</sup> Focus Group Four, November 28, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Focus Group Three, November 9, 2022.

Closely related here was the idea of feeling stuck and unable to break free, which then leads to a “pattern of behavior that was the same but didn’t get better results.”<sup>6</sup> While overall conversations and questionnaires helped to clarify the need to better define life not working as a self-imposed crisis one of the questionnaires provided this very helpful insight. “Even this, in real life, is not as clear as it seems – because there is plenty of sin to go around... very often our sin comes as a response to being sinned against. So, it’s easy to *not* see the part that your own sin has played in your crisis, but it’s so vital to go there.”<sup>7</sup> Based on the feedback received here I have shifted to using the language of self-inflicted crisis to help describe life not working in developing my project. Yet, there was a slight pushback to the idea of the crisis having to be self-inflicted. One of the questionnaires suggested, “the truth is, at some level or at some point we all feel that life is not working and are all prone to give up hope of things changing, others changing, and even us changing.”<sup>8</sup>

The idea of not giving hope sparked a lot of conversation and responses, and the idea seemed to connect with the responders across the board with consistent agreement with its importance. This overall sentiment here was well summarized by one of the respondents who commented, “the moment you give up hope you die.”<sup>9</sup> Several in the focus groups emphasized the importance of community in relation to not giving hope. One example of this being, “all wounds can be healed. Healing most often happens in community.”<sup>10</sup> The central idea here is that when one is struggling with despair they need the support of others to help them not lose

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<sup>6</sup> Focus Group One, February 2, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Questionnaire 20. (Questionnaires were collected between February 2 and 3, 2021 and October 27 and December 5, 2022.)

<sup>8</sup> Questionnaire 13.

<sup>9</sup> Questionnaire 11.

<sup>10</sup> Questionnaire 1.

hope. As soul care providers many could recall times when they were able to be a source of hope for others. Several also commented that they could remember times of personal despair when others were a source of hope for them when they needed it most. One comment that I found particularly insightful regarding the idea of hope was a caution against rushing someone into hope too soon. “I don’t want to rush someone out of their feeling and/or experience of hopelessness. Entering into the feeling of despair can help someone connect to their own feeling of hope or resilience.”<sup>11</sup> I had not previously considered this perspective but in reflecting upon it I found that it made a lot of sense. In both my own personal experiences and in walking along others dealing with brokenness I have come to understand the importance of leaning into and doing the painful work of processing that despair. One of the traits of a type seven on the Enneagram is to avoid pain and discomfort; therefore, in my own journey I have tended to not stay in the despair and hopelessness long enough to let it do its work. Yet as I have learned to resist this temptation and more fully experience this despair my healing has become more authentic and transformative. This insight of ensuring that people fully experience their hopelessness has helped shape the project that accompanies this thesis.

### **Find a Faith Rooted in Forgiveness**

This statement created a lot of discussion in the focus groups and insightful responses on the questionnaires. There was a lot of conversation and questions around the word faith as used by Gibson towards Downey Jr. Here I did not attempt to “answer” the question or define faith for the groups. Instead, I encourage those in the groups to answer based on their own

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<sup>11</sup> Questionnaire 4.

perspective and experiences. In two of the groups there was a good discussion regarding whether there needed to be a direct connection one participant asking, “Is faith really necessary for forgiveness?” and “What might forgiveness look like without faith?”<sup>12</sup> In another group the discussion centered on how one moves forward in life without a faith rooted in forgiveness. One of the participants here commented, “the alternative is perfection, trying harder doesn’t work.”<sup>13</sup> I found this particular comment to be very helpful in processing the importance of letting go, dying to self and ego, in the cactus hugging process.

The vast majority of the participants articulated in one way or another that they understood there to be a strong connection between faith and forgiveness in relation to the hug your cactus journey. A common theme here being that true forgiveness requires connecting to something outside one’s self and that faith does that. “No forgiveness = no hope! My attempt to heal myself just doesn’t work, it must come from the outside.”<sup>14</sup> Another commented, “faith comes first as the source of forgiveness.”<sup>15</sup> An additional recurring statement centered on the importance of forgiveness being both given and received. One comment here being, “but a faith rooted in forgiveness, if applied to the larger human population is a faith that recognizes both our need to be forgiven as well as extends forgiveness.”<sup>16</sup> There was also a general agreement that forgiveness is not easy, best summarized in the phrase, “forgiveness takes practice.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, it is worth noting that a lot of the conversation and comments made the connection between a faith rooted in forgiveness

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<sup>12</sup> Focus Group Three.

<sup>13</sup> Focus Group One.

<sup>14</sup> Questionnaire 5.

<sup>15</sup> Questionnaire 6.

<sup>16</sup> Questionnaire 13.

<sup>17</sup> Questionnaire 3.

and hope. In general, the participants observed that these two ideas built on each other and that the flow of the cactus hugging journey worked. One suggesting, “without forgiveness there cannot be real hope. Forgiveness seems to be the core of the cactus motif; that is forgiving self and others. Utter release.”<sup>18</sup> In developing my project this alerted me to the need to continue to make the connection clear between the different parts of the cactus hugging journey. I also realized the importance of making sure people understood that the ability to give and receive forgiveness are equally important in process of hugging your cactus.

### **Take Personal Responsibility for Wrong Doings**

In discussing this part of the cactus hugging journey there was a general agreement that taking personal responsibility is very difficult. One of the focus groups really focused on this being where real change can start to happen. One comment being change happens here when you, “resolve to see yourself differently by not being deceived and owning your sin as described 1 John chapter 1.”<sup>19</sup> Another group took this a little further focusing even more on the need here to be self-aware. This conversation was summarized well in the comment: “Recognition is important here, coming to terms with the real you, the real you that has caused harm to others.”<sup>20</sup>

In the [questionnaires](#) this theme of becoming self-aware continued with one emphasizing, “owning my [piece](#) of the pie, I can only work on me.”<sup>21</sup> Another brought attention to the need to, “look intently in the mirror and truly see who is there! No

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<sup>18</sup> Questionnaire 18.

<sup>19</sup> Focus Group Two, October 22, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Focus Group Four.

<sup>21</sup> Questionnaire 1.



deflection.”<sup>22</sup> The emphasis here is the need to look deep, beyond the surface of self. Another described this reality as, “coming to terms with your real-self and how your actions have betrayed it.”<sup>23</sup> These comments served to help me see the need to make sure that in my project I really emphasize the need to take a close, thorough, and again painful look at the harm one has caused others. In both the focus groups and questionnaires, the connection between taking personal responsibility and a faith rooted forgiveness was mentioned several times. One example being, “as you said the “steps” are fluid and I think this shows where a faith rooted in forgiveness leads and the freedom that comes from abiding in the true object of that faith (see John 8:31-32) and the reaction to those who failed to take personal responsibility.”<sup>24</sup> I found this comment to be very insightful in understanding forgiveness can help create the freedom needed to face the damage caused by not dying to self and ego. Another commented that taking personal responsibility, “is always in relationship with forgiveness, above. Letting ourselves off the hook for our problems actually allows us to accept responsibility for them and do something to make amends.”<sup>25</sup> This comment addresses the paradox of forgiveness, that true forgiveness actually promotes greater personal responsibility instead of diminishing it. These comments again affirmed that the parts of the cactus hugging journey are interconnected and build off of each other. The importance of community was referenced several times here, especially feedback from others. One example being, “this is the place where I invite others to give me tough love, to help me see my flaws, my sin, my blind-

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<sup>22</sup> Questionnaire 5.

<sup>23</sup> Questionnaire 19.

<sup>24</sup> Questionnaire 13.

<sup>25</sup> Questionnaire 16.

spots, and my weaknesses.”<sup>26</sup> I found comments like this to be an important reminder that we all need help in identifying our wrong doings as we are learning to take responsibility for them.

### **Embrace the Ugly Parts of Your Soul**

This is the part of the cactus hugging journey that triggered the greatest amount and variety of conversations and comments from the focus groups and questionnaire. In one of the focus groups the conversation centered on the need to see the ugly parts of the soul as part of the real person. One comment being, “it is part of you and your story and is not going away.”<sup>27</sup> In another group there was an honest dialogue regarding whether a person should embrace the ugly parts of self or not. One comment here being, “I admit that this is the part that I don’t get; does embracing the ugly mean that I simply acknowledge it, because I am uncomfortable with the idea that I somehow become comfortable with my sin.”<sup>28</sup> This sentiment was echoed in one of the questionnaires, “when I hear the word ‘embrace’ I immediately think ‘accept, celebrate, affirm.’ But if those ugly parts are sinful, the Bible teaches me to put those to death and repent of them.”<sup>29</sup> In the same focus group others commented that embrace does not have to mean celebrate or become comfortable with. Instead, they suggested that it means more, “to accept these parts of self, to know them so well that you learn to rein them in and limit the damage they cause to self and others.”<sup>30</sup> This perspective also came out in the questionnaires, one example being, “to know it so well as to see the next move coming far

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<sup>26</sup> Questionnaire 9.

<sup>27</sup> Focus Group Two.

<sup>28</sup> Focus Group Four.

<sup>29</sup> Questionnaire 20.

<sup>30</sup> Focus Group Four.

enough away to prevent it in advance. Or to embrace as to have a sense of humility and knowledge of self.”<sup>31</sup> These two perspectives helped shape my project by showing me the importance of clarifying what is meant by certain terms, especially the use of word embrace in relation to the ugly parts of the soul. Therefore, the paradoxical nature of cactus hugging really needs to be emphasized in my project. This includes demonstrating how one’s cactus is integrated into their life; without being shunned or celebrated.

Overall, the phrase or metaphor hugging the cactus or hugging your cactus seemed to resonate well with the participants. In another of the focus groups it was discussed how the cactus hugging terminology, “served to remind us that it’s painful and humbling” and “it’s important to embrace the ugly, don’t just give it a superficial hug.”<sup>32</sup> This idea of the metaphor working because it emphasizes the pain associated with embracing the ugly parts of self came up in several of the questioners. An example of this was the comment, “this is painful too and scary and humbling – embrace the pain and deal with it. Confess openly to God, that’s easy. Confessing openly honestly to another person is harder, but it is healing and freeing.”<sup>33</sup> The pain of this process also came out in describing the hard work associated with coming to terms with the ugly parts of self. For example, “this is where I do the real painful, meaningful work. This is where I don’t accept surface-level and superficial answers. I ask God to reveal the roots of the false/shadow parts of my soul.”<sup>34</sup> The importance of going beyond the surface level and superficial answers as referenced here served as a reminder to emphasize in my project that

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<sup>31</sup> Questionnaire 18.

<sup>32</sup> Focus Group One.

<sup>33</sup> Questionnaire 14.

<sup>34</sup> Questionnaire 9.

cactus hugging requires one to go deep into self to find the root or source of the ugly parts of their soul.

This idea of embracing the ugly parts of the soul also triggered a lot of conversation and comments around the idea of how this relates to a holistic sense of self. One respondent stated, “I consider this to be the parts of self that I want to discard or get rid of. Wholeness comes from embracing and integrating this part of self.”<sup>35</sup> Another commented that this is, “self-awareness, loving all of yourself”<sup>36</sup> I think it’s important to note here that several affirmed how the cactus hugging metaphor of embracing the ugly parts of self can be very helpful in developing a more holistic and healthy sense of self. This happens as one learns to integrate instead of to separate or isolate the ugly parts of self with the rest. I found this insight to be very helpful in developing ideas for my project. Related to this idea of integration, I also received several comments on how embracing the ugly parts of self can also help promote personal healing and growth. For example, one commented, “instead of ignoring or covering up my sins I call them out. Sometimes they don’t go away, but now I can begin the journey of dealing with them and move towards health.”<sup>37</sup> Another suggested, “as we embrace the ugly parts, we learn from them to harness and even use them to help others as well as ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> Overall, the participants in the focus groups and questionnaires affirmed strongly that embracing the ugly parts of one’s soul, while painful, also facilitates a great opportunity for personal growth and a healthier, more holistic sense of self.

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<sup>35</sup> Questionnaire 4.

<sup>36</sup> Questionnaire 3.

<sup>37</sup> Questionnaire 8.

<sup>38</sup> Questionnaire 17.

### **Do This Long Enough and Gain Some Humility**

In both the focus groups and questionnaires there developed strong agreement that a process like hugging your cactus and learning to embrace the ugly parts of one's soul takes time to work. In one of the focus groups it was noted, "humility and gaining empathy is not immediate like salvation, it takes time to work."<sup>39</sup> In another group a similar conversation occurred around the continued idea of self-awareness: "This is a continual process of self-love that requires practice."<sup>40</sup> My research in chapter three brought out the idea of moving from false of shadow self and discovering or rediscovering one's essence or authentic self, which again takes time. This was echoed in my research here with one of the comments being, "it takes time to become who we were intended to be!"<sup>41</sup> The connection between cactus hugging taking time and humility also came out fairly consistently. One example being, "learning a certain knowledge always takes time and practice, and it could be leading into humility."<sup>42</sup> Another more specifically connected this to enduring through difficult times. "Humility seems to come after there is a season of suffering or extended trials."<sup>43</sup> These conversations and responses served as a confirmation that the process of hugging your cactus can produce humility, but the time it takes to actually work cannot be overemphasized.

Similar to the idea of cactus hugging taking time, the concept of this being an ongoing journey of developing one's character came up several times in my research. One suggested here, "You don't get delivered into character, it's a journey not a destination."<sup>44</sup> Another tied

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<sup>39</sup> Focus Group Two.

<sup>40</sup> Focus Group Three.

<sup>41</sup> Questionnaire 5.

<sup>42</sup> Questionnaire 15.

<sup>43</sup> Questionnaire 18.

<sup>44</sup> Questionnaire 1.

this idea back to accepting personal responsibility. “Ongoing accepting personal responsibility for my own and my part in the world’s problems breeds humility.”<sup>45</sup> There was also a general agreement that this ongoing process doesn’t have an earthly endpoint. One example of this being, “some humility – an ongoing struggle until God calls us home. It is a lifelong embrace.”<sup>46</sup> Several involved in my research also emphasized how humility includes an understanding that life isn’t just about self. In another of the focus groups a great conversation came out of the question, “Would I grab a cactus to save someone?”<sup>47</sup> The thought here being that as a soul care provider we hug our own cactus in part so that we can help others learn to hug theirs. One also commented in their questionnaire, “as I struggle through my sins I recognize that I am not the center of the universe and I can begin to see myself in the right perspective.”<sup>48</sup> Another offered the similar perspective that, “humility flows from admitting my faults.”<sup>49</sup> Yet another made a similar connection to Paul to what I proposed in chapter two. “Love this – seems to be what Paul experienced, and what he expressed when he called himself ‘chief of sinners.’”<sup>50</sup> These responses and others served to affirm the invitations connected with cactus hugging to deny or die to self in chapter two and ego as chapter three of this thesis-project.

### **Life Will Take on a New Meaning**

In this last part of the hugging your cactus metaphor there was a strong sentiment among those participating in my research of the importance of finding purpose in one’s

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<sup>45</sup> Questionnaire 16.

<sup>46</sup> Questionnaire 17.

<sup>47</sup> Focus Group One.

<sup>48</sup> Questionnaire 8.

<sup>49</sup> Questionnaire 10.

<sup>50</sup> Questionnaire 20.

brokenness. In one of the focus groups this was described; this is a healing process tied to the Biblical idea of new life: brokenness that leads to humbleness of heart that gives purpose.”<sup>51</sup> In another group this new meaning was connected to healing, “asking the question what now? The story has changed, so accepting this change and new meaning.”<sup>52</sup> Some similar ideas were expressed in the questionnaires making a strong connection between self-awareness and new meaning. “Continued self-awareness and personal growth gives new meaning, understanding of self and their meaning, also purpose in life.”<sup>53</sup> The idea of this new meaning being connected to new life out of death came out several times. One example of this being, “resurrection, new life, doesn’t just come through death in an instant, but the process of dying and sitting in it for a minute. As Paul said, the suffering of that mental/emotional/spiritual dying, if submitted to ‘hugged’ will lead to a life of new hope (see Rom. 5:1-11)”<sup>54</sup> Another connected this new meaning to forgiveness, thus showing again the fluidity of the parts of the cactus hugging journey. “When all the above is done, we find forgiveness and life changes, yes.”<sup>55</sup> A strong sense of gratitude as closely connected to this idea of finding purpose came out in my research. One example of this being, “through the refining of clear vision of who I am and where I have been comes at the heart of a thankful creature.”<sup>56</sup> Another made a pretty compelling point that contentment is also important, “which may include less of a need for meaning at all. Maybe there is no reason. Maybe life is just life, to be lived for its own sake.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Focus Group Two

<sup>52</sup> Focus Group Three

<sup>53</sup> Questionnaire 4.

<sup>54</sup> Questionnaire 13.

<sup>55</sup> Questionnaire 12.

<sup>56</sup> Questionnaire 5.

<sup>57</sup> Questionnaire 16.

This comment caused me to pause and reflect some on the temptation to overemphasize the need for meaning. This added a different perspective on the cactus hugging journey; part of dying to self and ego could very well be dying to the constant need for meaning.

In unpacking this idea of life taking on new meaning several emphasized how this enables one to help others. This was also referenced in the speech from Downey Jr. when he commented that all Gibson asked him to do in return is to help the next person. This came out strongly in one of the focus groups where it was shared that this new meaning is, “helpful for both the caregiver and receiver, especially helping the next guy, creating a chain reaction of help, and using what you have learned to help others.”<sup>58</sup> In this context the importance of storytelling came out with one commenting, “tell your story; step into someone else’s chaos and mess. This is what God did in creation and what He still does. This is your purpose, help others and find hope.”<sup>59</sup> The importance of storytelling was also a key aspect of healing in chapter three of this thesis, especially within the 12 Step tradition. There was also a strong emphasis on sharing the insights gained from hugging your cactus with others. Here one commented, “once I find my own meaning for life my new meaning is to share this new-found spiritual health with others. Christ life and love spills over to others.”<sup>60</sup> This helping others also extended to seeing others in a new light. One example of this being, “This is all about reframing life, not based on what I do or produce or accomplish but resting on God’s grace. I continually learn to seek God’s beauty because he saved me from great ugliness. I learn to accept the ugliness of others because I have accepted the ugliness within.”<sup>61</sup> Another shared a

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<sup>58</sup> Focus Group One.

<sup>59</sup> Questionnaire 1.

<sup>60</sup> Questionnaire 8.

<sup>61</sup> Questionnaire 9.



similar thought, but also connected it back to humility. “Absolutely, because a life rooted in gospel humility takes on a whole new meaning. A big part of that meaning, in my opinion, is that we respond to the ugly parts of others with a newfound sense of compassion and grace. (as Downey Jr. was doing with Gibson).”<sup>62</sup> This emphasis on using the journey of hugging your cactus to help another person and even see the ugliness of others with compassion was a very affirming part of my research. It also helped to shape my project, giving me confidence that the resources I developed could be used in both the care of one’s own soul and in caring for others.

### **Using the Data to Develop a Project**

My original plan was to use my research on the metaphor of cactus hugging to develop a guide or booklet. However, as I worked through the data, I realized that I wanted to create something that was more hands on and easily accessible. Overall, the data that I collected through the focus groups and questionnaires showed that the ideas around hugging your cactus resonated strongly with the participants. There was a healthy amount of questions for clarification and even push back at times, but these actually proved to be very helpful in sharpening my work into a usable project. I also believe that my research was successful in testing and even affirming my hypothesis that: The cactus hugging metaphor works as an approach to soul care. Beyond the formal research of the focus groups and questionnaires I have experienced numerous conversations with a variety people that have affirmed the cactus hugging metaphor. One of these was a text that came from one of the participants of the focus groups.

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<sup>62</sup> Questionnaire 20.

You can use anything from our conversation the other night and if you want me to clarify or qualify anything let me know. But the gist was about embracing our darkness/sin and owning it leading to repentance, forgiveness and good for change. Taking responsibility for our actions regardless of reasons that might have caused them. And the strengths we have are still in there leading to hope for change.<sup>63</sup>

I found this to be a very good summary of the hugging your cactus journey, especially in showing how the parts are fluid and interconnected. Having one of the participants of my research being able to articulate the cactus hugging journey helped me see that its ideas were not only resonating, but also actually working in someone else's life. Another example of this came from an individual who saw me working on my thesis one day and asked what it was about. We spent a good thirty minutes to an hour discussing it on a couple of different occasions, then out of the blue he sent me the following note.

I told my father in law about hugging the cactus yesterday. He told me he could not stop thinking about that for 12 hours. He said it's the first time he's truly accepted himself, and forgave himself. He has always felt the guilt and shame of long ago sin. Thank you so much for sharing this expression. God bless you Pastor Chris!!<sup>64</sup>

Again, this showed me how this simple metaphor can work as an approach to soul care. With this feedback and the formal research, I decided to develop two interactive online resources for Hugging Your Cactus. The first being a Hugging Your Cactus You-Tube channel to upload video summaries of the different parts of the cactus hugging journey and even conduct interviews with others who could bring different perspectives. The second was a Hugging Your Cactus blog, where I could post blogs, articles and even reviews of movies, etc. that help develop the metaphor. For the sake of this thesis

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<sup>63</sup> Text Received Dec 6, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Text Received Dec 21, 2022.

project I decided to develop one initial You-Tube video and blog. I then invited some of the participants of the focus groups to review these materials and provide feedback on them, especially as to how they might use them in their own context as soul care providers. These resources and the feedback on them are developed in the final chapter five of this thesis-project.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OUTCOMES

#### **Developing the Project**

Before engaging the project itself, I will first review what is meant by the metaphor of cactus hugging, as well as how this metaphor has been unpacked up to this point. From the speech by Robert Downey Jr., I have been working from the following definition of hugging your cactus: When one's life is not working due to a self-imposed crisis, embrace the ugly part(s) of your soul long enough to become a person of humility and for life to take on new meaning. The term embracing here has been understood as both loving this part of self, for it is not going away and yet also seeking to rein it in and limit its damage. This has been developed as a six-part journey from Downey Jr's speech; a journey of self-discovery as one integrates their cactus into a fuller, more holistic sense of self. This journey was theologically and biblically presented as the invitation from Jesus to deny or "die to self." This was demonstrated through the life of the zealous Pharisee and persecutor of the church Saul, who became the equally zealous Paul the Apostle of the church to the Gentiles. Paul's own description of a "thorn in the flesh" was given special attention here as a way of understanding the metaphor of cactus hugging theologically. While embracing the ugly parts of the soul and dying to self may appear to be in contrast to each other, Paul made it clear that he understood that his thorn remained in his life to increase his humility and so that God's sufficient grace may abound in his life. So, Paul understood that his cactus or thorn was not going away, despite asking God to take it from him. For Paul this was his zeal - therefore the very zeal that was used to bring the message of Jesus

to the Gentiles, when left unchecked became the very thing that caused damage to himself and others. Over time Paul came to terms with his thorn and cactus, learning to hug it; reining it in to limit its damage. He also learned to integrate it into his life, which is a key part of understanding the hug your cactus metaphor. This journey was also presented as an invitation to “die to” ego, that false of the shadow part of self that pulls one away from their true self or essence. Here the six parts of the journey were presented by engaging three traditions: The Enneagram of Personality, Contemplative Prayer, and the 12 Steps. Each of these traditions offered different perspectives and insights to the cactus hugging journey. The Enneagram for example helped show how the negative traits of a specific personality type or “face of the soul” can be used to help one identify and address their cactus. Contemplative Prayer through disciplines and practices like prayer, meditation, stillness, silence, and solitude, served to show how one can create the time and space needed to process and unpack the parts of the cactus hugging journey. The 12 Steps were most helpful in understanding how certain addictive behaviors and patterns of behaviors are related to the self-inflicted crisis of one’s life not working. The 12 Steps also showed the importance of the connection between healing and telling one’s story. Finally, this journey was presented by collecting data from focus groups and questionnaires. This data was then used to help shape my project “Online Resources for Hugging Your Cactus.”

To get further feedback from participants from the focus groups I created two online resources, both titled “An Intro to Hugging Your Cactus.” I first developed a blog site on the

Word Press platform<sup>1</sup> and then a You-Tube channel;<sup>2</sup> both titled “Hug Your Cactus.” The purpose here was to present similar material in two different formats. In both the video and the blog, I repeated the same format as used throughout this thesis-project, unpacking each of the six parts of the cactus hugging journey as presented by Robert Downey Jr. The purpose of these two introductions was to make the metaphor of hug your cactus accessible and user friendly to people involved in the care of souls, both their own and others. For the video I used a cactus quilt that members of my church made for me as a backdrop. A picture of this quilt can be found in the appendix. A friend of mine with experience filming and editing videos helped pull it all together and is credited at the end of the video. The video was filmed in one complete take and then uploaded onto the You-Tube channel.<sup>3</sup> I did not make the video live for the general public until I received comments from the selected participants from my focus groups. A screen shot of the You-Tube channel and video are also included in the appendix. For the blog I also utilized a friend who had experience in developing a blog using the Word Press platform. I chose a theme and built out a page using cactus images. From there I developed the first blog post. For this first post I used the questionnaire from the focus groups as a template. Once this post was completed, I uploaded it to the blog page to be reviewed by the focus group participants.<sup>4</sup> A copy of the blog site and first post are included in the

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Holder, “Hug Your Cactus: Embracing the Ugly Parts of Your Soul,” accessed January 16, 2023, <https://hugyourcactus.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Holder, “Hug Your Cactus,” accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@hugyourcactus8535>.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Holder, “Intro to Hugging Your Cactus,” Hug Your Cactus, accessed January 16, 2023, YouTube video, 21:44, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXS\\_4rqngnY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXS_4rqngnY).

<sup>4</sup> Chris Holder, “Intro to Hugging Your Cactus,” Hug Your Cactus: Embracing the Ugly Parts of Your Soul, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://hugyourcactus.com/2023/01/11/intro-to-hugging-your-cactus/>.

appendix. As I mentioned in chapter four, I used the feedback from the focus groups and questionnaires to help develop the content for the video and blog.

### **Evaluation and Feedback on the Project**

Once the project was completed, I asked the selected participants from the focus groups to provide feedback on the project itself. This was done by emailing them a link to both resources and providing the following instructions:

There are two resources to review, both introductions to Hugging Your Cactus. The first is a You-Tube channel and video and the second a blog post and page. To participate all I need you to do is first post a comment at the end of the video and/or blog each just as you might any other video or blog. Then reply directly to this email (to me only) sharing how you could envision these resources being used in your own context of caring for souls. If you would rather not share general comments online, you can email them to me as well.<sup>5</sup>

A total of 14 individuals responded in at least one of the above options from January 17-23, 2023. This included 13 direct responses, four comments after the blog, and seven after the video. Some responded or commented in more than one manner which accounts for the total equaling more than 14. After January 23rd I opened up comments beyond this initial feedback group to others that I had shared these resources with. In order to expand the sample size a bit I asked for additional feedback, and eventually ended up with feedback from 24 different individuals through the combination of the blog, video, and direct e-mail responses. Both resources remain available online and continue to receive feedback even as new content is being developed. I compiled the responses in order to interact with the feedback provided,

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<sup>5</sup> From email sent to participants on January 16, 2023.

assigning each of the 19 total that came from the direct replies a number for reference purposes.

The first type of feedback that I received consisted of more general comments regarding the resources themselves. Overall, the feedback was very positive and affirming. In general, they seemed to appreciate the accessibility and presentation of the resources. There was also strong agreement that the resources helped to explain and unpack the metaphor of cactus hugging. There was some helpful critique that the video was long. One saying here, “the video is good, but long. You might want to break it up into the headings like the blog. I think doing that and pairing them together would make this an accessible resource. Well done!”<sup>6</sup> As I develop more online resources this was a helpful reminder that some of them need to be shorter and even perhaps broke down into smaller parts. Another suggested that the resources were a little lacking in theological depth. “I am a little surprised that you do not lean more into theological or biblical content. Of course, it’s me and I’m very traditional. I know you want to keep it more appealing to a wider audience.”<sup>7</sup> They went on to offer some more specific examples, but the point was well taken. While I did want these introduction resources to appeal more broadly, there are a lot of Biblical and theological research and insights that went into this thesis-project. So again, this is something for me to consider as I develop more blog and video resources. My passion for the topic and desire to develop it came out in feedback. With one offering these encouraging words, “I like your enthusiasm in explaining this method Chris. I hope you continue to build on it and this may become a blessing to a lot of people.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Email Reply, Three. (E-mail replies were received between January 17 and February 2, 2023.)

<sup>7</sup> Email Reply, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Email Reply, Eight.



Several also appreciate how I used my own journey as an example. Here one commented, “I liked how you shared from your own story (‘I exhaust people...’ & ‘I am a glutton for attention’ lol) and owned your stuff and modeled your own ways that you have embraced this process”<sup>9</sup> Another furthered that same thought, suggesting it helped to make the metaphor more accessible. “I liked the video! I think some of the strengths you displayed were in your vulnerability as you shared “your cactus journey” (I really like that phrase). It took something that was a bit obscure and made it tangible.”<sup>10</sup> Several also appreciated the development of the metaphor itself. One comment here being:

Cactus hugging arises as a unique metaphor in the stream of transformation common among humanity’s religious and philosophical traditions. And the metaphor rings true with my own experience working the 12 Steps. Thanks for your contribution to the human experiment through this project, Chris.<sup>11</sup>

More specifically my treatment of the invitation to die to self or ego was well received with one commenting. “This is the most foundational invitation into the Christian experience. One cannot even enter into this thing called the Christian faith without first hugging the cactus, dying to self. This is also the ongoing journey, daily dying to self while being rooted in forgiveness.”<sup>12</sup> This comment also reinforced the idea that hugging your cactus is not a one-time experience or reality, but an ongoing reality. The cactus like Paul’s thorn in the flesh remains in one’s life even after coming to faith for their own humility and to more fully experience God’s grace. Instead, it is integrated into one’s life, limiting its damage to self and others. Another developed this idea further making an important observation regarding self

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<sup>9</sup> Email Reply, Four.

<sup>10</sup> Email Reply, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus."

<sup>12</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

and ego. "Love the cactus background and T-shirt. Great distinction between self and ego. Dying to self doesn't mean giving up who you are, but the ego that takes you bad directions. Leaning in, but not losing hope, important."<sup>13</sup> This comment was particularly helpful in developing and reinforcing the cactus hugging image of embracing the ugly parts of the soul. The core of who a person is does not change in the cactus hugging journey, this was evidenced in Paul's journey in chapter two. The fallen or sin nature remains and still manifests itself in ugliness. This was seen in Paul's own confession as the chief of sinners. One feedback helped reinforce this point, "also, the simul justus et peccator (saint and sinner) piece is always important. Own your ugliness but know that Jesus has redeemed this too."<sup>14</sup> Again this cactus or thorn, the ugly part of self is not going away, even for those redeemed by Christ. Yet as one acknowledges and takes responsibility for their own ugliness, they can also better rein in these harmful behaviors and limit the damage they cause to self and others; which is part of this idea of embracing in the cactus hugging journey. This connection to Paul, particularly his thorn in the flesh, was commented on by several. One example being, "I really like the scriptural reference to the 'thorn in the flesh.' That's a good connection and a great place to really transition to grace and forgiveness."<sup>15</sup> Another used the Paul reference to make a deeper spiritual connection here that I found very insightful.

I do love the hope that the process gives to those struggling with any number of various thorns in the flesh. In Christ and by His forgiveness we always have a way forward and to grow. Instead of ignoring or justifying hindrances in life, we can learn to acknowledge our own shortcomings, take responsibility for them, and use the process to rely less on ourselves and more on the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

<sup>14</sup> Email Reply, Two.

<sup>15</sup> Email Reply, Four.

<sup>16</sup> Email Reply, 14.

This made another nice connection to Paul's own conclusion that his thorn served to keep him humble and more dependent on God's sufficient grace. This again affirms the idea that embracing or accepting the ugliness or personal shortcomings is a path to growth, humility and a life of new meaning. Another found this Paul connection helpful in working through the idea of accepting or embracing the ugly or problematic parts of self.

The sense that we need to find a way to 'hug' those parts of self that may be the problematic areas. Accepting these areas seems, as you say, paradoxical. I've usually prayed for God to help me through these challenges, so accepting them does, indeed, seem like a paradox. St. Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was quite insightful and provides a new perspective as it relates to my cactus. 'My grace is sufficient for you...'<sup>17</sup>

This insight shows an important part of understanding cactus hugging theologically; followers of Jesus can embrace the ugly parts of their soul, because they are in part there to humbly remind us like Paul, that His grace is truly sufficient. Another made a connection between this sufficient grace and Jesus's work on the cross. "Jesus hugged the cactus of humanity on the cross; he sees all our ugliness and yet is drawn in love that kisses our cactus. This kind of reminds me of Beauty and the Beast. The beauty (Jesus) kisses the Beast in each of us with his love and acceptance."<sup>18</sup> I found this to be a very insightful way to approach the cactus theologically and a great idea for future content for my online resources.

One idea that came out of the original data collected, the need to emphasize life not working as a self-inflicted crisis came out in a positive way here, one example being:

This is truly fantastic. The embrace part was a big focus in Rogers Behavioral Health. Own who you are and what you have done. A great distinction for me in dealing with the negative emotions that come from my mistakes was to learn the difference between actions that cause guilt (something we can change and ask forgiveness for) and shame

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<sup>17</sup> Email Reply, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

(something we didn't necessarily have control over but we experience it from outside sources).<sup>19</sup>

I found this to be a great reminder that the purpose of hugging your cactus and embracing the ugly is not to heap on guilt or shame, but to point one back to forgiveness and back on the path to personal responsibility, and over time true healing and new meaning. There were also several comments that affirmed the connection I made between the cactus and the shadow self.

I appreciate that you encouraged us to, 'recognize and even love that part of you and your story – because these are not going away.' There certainly are portions of ourselves to be brought out of the shadow and into the light. When we do this, when we are aware of these 'thorns' we now can 'hug,' them to embrace and to be aware of their power to harm ourselves and others. Therefore, we can take their power back.<sup>20</sup>

This idea of bringing the false or shadow part of self/ego to the light was one of the key insights in engaging the Enneagram of Personality in chapter three. The comment above affirmed the importance of facing, loving, and dealing with self as it really is, a key part of the personal transformation that Downey Jr. acknowledged as he shared the metaphor in his speech. Again, as Paul's thorn in the flesh metaphor affirmed, even as these ugly shadow parts of self are brought to the light, they remain a part of self; they aren't going away. They are even there for the purpose of growing one's humility and experience of grace. This points to the importance of learning to integrate all the parts of self, even the ugly ones, into a healthier, more holistic sense of self. Another affirmed the role that tools like the Enneagram can have in better understanding self. "Using personality as a starting point in this discovery, which you do, is useful and helpful. Again, thanks for this great, thought-provoking information." I found this

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<sup>19</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus."

<sup>20</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus."

helpful in thinking through future applications and content for the online resources. It also reminded me of the importance of knowing self well enough to be able to face, love and deal with the ugly parts.<sup>21</sup> While several made the connection with cactus hugging and the 12 Steps, they also appreciated how I distinguished one's cactus from specific behaviors. "I especially appreciate the point that your 'cactus' is deeper than exterior behaviors/addictions, etc., but is a part of one's soul... however one wants to describe the make-up of one's 'soul.' So, caring for it includes learning about it and embracing it."<sup>22</sup> The idea of cactus hugging, embracing the ugly parts of the soul taking time to produce humility and new meaning also came out in the feedback.

I really like how you talk about it being 'work' and a process and that it 'takes time.' We can't rush this sort of work. I was always astounded that my counselor warned me that counseling and soul care often makes us feel worse before we get better; often this is because we are finally addressing the shadow side of ourselves and our souls, beginning to "hug our cactus." There's a part of ourselves that we need to die to, but it's an ugly and messy process. That's why we need metaphors that assume that it's not going to easy or pretty.<sup>23</sup>

This feedback is connected closely to the interaction with the tradition of Contemplative Prayer from chapter three which includes spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, silence, solitude and contemplation. For it is the integration of practicing these disciplines over time while one hugs their cactus that can produce humility and new meaning. Another made a helpful connection between embracing the ugly, forgiveness, and humility, "What I appreciate about this metaphor is the countercultural message that we lean into our weakness and embrace that which is ugly in us. That is tough stuff, as you say. But that humility allows us to embrace and

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<sup>21</sup> Email Reply, Six.

<sup>22</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

<sup>23</sup> Email Reply, Four.

live in forgiveness.”<sup>24</sup> This was consistent with the idea that the parts of the cactus journey are better understood as fluid and interconnected.

I also received helpful feedback on how these resources might be used more specifically in the context of providing soul care. Here the context of caring for souls towards the end of life made a strong connection. One making the observation, “in my ministry to the homebound and grieving, I do often encourage people to look at themselves and their lives, both good and bad, and embrace them. Some families have deep rifts and encouraging people to own their part of those rifts rather than blaming others.”<sup>25</sup> Another saw this as an opportunity to help people address this issue earlier in life: “Facing one's own death is the universal cactus hugging opportunity. You are inviting people to hug the cactus on purpose before disease and physical breakdown requires it of us. Working in hospice, I most often encounter people in the latter situation.”<sup>26</sup> Because of the connection to grace, several suggested applying it to their own care contexts, especially in offering hope to one processing their own self-inflicted crises. “Hugging your cactus is catchy, but more importantly it's an effective metaphor for the necessary work one can undertake to address an underlying issue that has been short-circuiting life and blurring the ability to see and live in to a hope filled future.”<sup>27</sup> This affirmed the role of community in helping another not lose hope as they face the reality of their life not working do to a self-imposed crisis. Another connected this idea of offering hope to helping others see God's grace in the midst of dealing with their own ugliness, especially in the context of providing direct pastoral care.

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<sup>24</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

<sup>25</sup> Email Reply, Two.

<sup>26</sup> Email Reply, Five.

<sup>27</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus."

Helping people to come face-to-face with the painful ugliness of their own sin through 'cactus-hugging,' this could help people to finally see the path toward God's grace, which can bring hope for the future. So I could envision this resource being used in pastoral care/counseling sessions, and perhaps in addiction/recovery ministry.<sup>28</sup>

Also building on this idea of grace, another envisioned an even more specific confession and absolution application which I found very intriguing.

The way that this soul care motif can be best applied in 21st century ministry is by seeing it as another expression of confession and forgiveness. It has deep and wide homiletical applications as it can offer a fresh way of telling the Gospel story to broken people. Further, the motif itself would function well as a guiding metaphor or even a liturgical rite.<sup>29</sup>

This again reinforces the importance of community and storytelling in helping others journey from self-imposed crisis to humility and a life of new meaning. Both are strengths of the 12 Steps, particularly when one is overcoming a specific addiction related to their cactus.

However, as the research in chapter three showed that community and storytelling in the tradition of the 12 Steps can benefit anyone on the cactus hugging journey. Another suggested that it could also be a resource used in a broader ministry context, especially empowering other leaders. "I think it is both a good resource for those in need of soul care and is straightforward enough for those helping care for the souls of others in a non-professional way (i.e., group leaders)."<sup>30</sup> Several commented on the helpfulness of cactus hugging as journey, with one suggesting, "This introduces people to specific themes and steps involved in facing personal vulnerabilities. It calls to mind the practice of repentance and it encourages trust in God along the journey. Good discussion and invitation into a helpful path."<sup>31</sup> Some specifically saw value

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<sup>28</sup> Email Reply, One.

<sup>29</sup> Email Reply, Nine

<sup>30</sup> Email Reply, Three.

<sup>31</sup> Holder, "Intro to Hugging Your Cactus," 21.44.

in using this as an approach to help men open up more, one example being, “I envision using this in a men's ministry where guys often compartmentalize and distance themselves from the deeper parts of themselves; they have a work/church/exterior person, but their interior/true self is seldom seen. This might be a helpful tool.”<sup>32</sup> Others even made a connection to specific current soul care situations, one planned to use it to help an individual take personal responsibility. “So much of his problem was in his inability or desire to own his problems. For him, it seems that life is always happening to him, but not that he has caused his own struggles. Using the ‘hugging the cactus’ metaphor may be a solid means of communicating a path forward with him.”<sup>33</sup> Another found a use for it in the context of teaching. “I am actually doing a Bible class on Mental Health in the church right now. We are moving into a week on addictions and the care of those who are stuck. I will most likely show this as a part of the conversation.”<sup>34</sup> Here they found value in using the idea of cactus hugging as a resource to those who are providing soul care to someone who is stuck in their self-imposed crisis. Along a similar line one of the respondents envisioned developing these, resourced into an expanded series. “I know this sounds very pastoral; but the first thought I had was that this would make a great sermon series to combine with a great small group Bible study. It would be great to have a lot of questions to help people discuss each part of this process.”<sup>35</sup> This was not something I had previously considered, but I do see how this could be a good application of my research, especially my work on Paul. Their hope for such research was to, “move people to bring lasting,

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<sup>32</sup> Email Reply, Four.

<sup>33</sup> Email Reply, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Email Reply, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Email Reply, 19.



transformational change to their life. That would take more than a one-off video.”<sup>36</sup> I found this to be a valid point and a validation of my intention to develop both and different types of online resources moving forward. Another observation was made regarding the importance of applying these resources to one’s self, as you are helping others.

As a CPE student, we have also been talking about the ‘long bag we drag behind us.’ So, I have really been looking at my shadow side. How I incorporate this at bedside, I am still working on. But, as a chaplain, you have to have done the work inside of you first, if you hope to go there with another.<sup>37</sup>

This again reinforces my hypothesis that hugging the cactus metaphor can work as an approach to the care of one’s own soul as well as the care of others. Another demonstrated how the metaphor has specifically played out in their personal life and how it can be used to connect or reconnect with Jesus in a deeper way.

Specifically for me, cactus hugging led me to a process of intimacy, silence and solitude and rediscovering identity in Christ. It led to rediscovering my union with Jesus. I believe this includes a Spiritual Director, a few brothers to walk with, and creating spaces where the presence and love of Jesus is tangibly experienced.<sup>38</sup>

This comment further reinforces the value of the spiritual disciplines related to the tradition of Contemplative Prayer as developed in chapter three. It also speaks to the value of community, the need for others to walk along with during the cactus hugging journey. The reference to the role of a Spiritual Director here is one that I found very insightful. I believe that the cactus hugging metaphor could be a very useful tool for Spiritual Directors. This is one application I would like to develop more in the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Email Reply, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Email Reply, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Email Reply, 18.

Overall, I was very encouraged by the feedback received from those who engaged with my project. The number of potential ministry contexts offered for the online resources was a pleasant surprise. I was also challenged to make sure that I am clearly defining my terms and making clear connections as I develop these resources. I look forward to using this to further develop these resources and develop new content moving forward. The feedback received from the online resources confirmed my hypothesis that the metaphor, hug your cactus, works as an approach to the care of souls. The feedback from my initial focus groups and questionnaires helped to clarify the best contexts for this metaphor to work. One example of this being the need to emphasize that the metaphor seems to work best in the context of life not working due to a self-imposed crisis. Another being that moving from hopelessness to hope can happen too quickly and that sometimes a season of leaning into hopelessness can actually help with the healing process, as it has in my own journey. A need to better define soul care also develops along the way as well. Integration towards a holistic sense of self, including dying to self and ego, as an approach to understanding embracing the ugly parts also proved helpful. These insights, along with others, when implemented into the project itself showed hugging your cactus to be a helpful resource for soul care, which was validated by the feedback from my peers.

### **What I Learned and Areas for Further Study**

From engaging with the two rounds of feedback before and after my project I discovered that while I had a clear idea in my head of what the cactus hugging metaphor meant, I still needed to be a bit clearer as I unpack it to others. This led me to go back to each

chapter of the thesis-project and make sure a clear and consistent definition of cactus hugging could be found throughout. I also learned that the word “embrace” as related to the ugly parts of the soul was also in need of similar clarification. Another insight that I gained in this process was to make sure that the connections were clearly presented between the original speech by Downey Jr; the theological/Biblical insights of Paul; and the interaction with the three traditions of the Enneagram, Contemplative Prayer, and the 12 Steps. This also involved going back through the previous chapters and making these connections as appropriate.

This thesis-project originated from coming face to face with the reality that parts of my life were not working and that my own patterns of behavior were contributing to this self-imposed crisis. More specifically, I was struggling with a tendency towards, even an addiction to adrenaline, chaos, and attention. Through the process of unpacking the cactus hugging metaphor in my own life I learned that my own cactus, or ugly part of my soul is a gluttonous tendency to always want more that prevented me from being content and even fully present in the moment. For me keeping hope was never an issue, yet I did have to learn to lean into and experience the pain of the hopelessness for a season. From there I also experienced forgiveness, given and received in a new way, as I also took responsibility for my actions. As I hugged my cactus over time and worked through the life of Paul as well as the traditions of the 12 Steps, Enneagram of Personality and Contemplative Prayer, I also learned how to integrate these ugly parts of my soul into a healthier, more holistic sense of self. From this I gained some humility, and my life continues to take on new meaning. This is important because the cactus hugging journey is an ongoing journey. Yet hugging the cactus did work for

myself as it did for Robert Downey Jr. I believe in the thesis-project I have demonstrated that it can also work for others who are willing to hug their cactus.

As for areas for further studies, I believe that my project opens the door for me to explore many of the aspects of cactus hugging further as I develop more content and online resources. My plan is to also invite others to contribute content and even do some interviews with others who have connected to the metaphor. This could include mapping out the cactus hugging journey of other Biblical, historical and even contemporary figures. One example of this I found was the movie *Rocketman* that tells the story of music icon Elton John.<sup>39</sup> This movie account of his life starts with John in his full concert regalia at a 12 Step meeting. His life has reached a self-imposed crisis. As he begins to share his story at the meeting a series of flashbacks tell the story of his life, which reveals a childhood wound from a broken relationship with his father. Throughout the story of his life the scene periodically returns to the 12 Step meeting, and as he is telling his story parts of his very colorful and elaborate costume slowly come off. Until the end when he is wearing just a simple track suit and the childhood version of himself appears. Here he embraces this part of self and ego that he was running from, finally integrating into a more holistic sense of self. I want to explore more cactus hugging stories like this and use my online resources to unpack them. I also want to continue to learn more about the three traditions that I utilized here and in my own journey: The 12 Steps, The Enneagram of Personality, and Contemplative Prayer. Most importantly I want to continue to develop the cactus hugging metaphor to help others along the journey of life not working due to a self-

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<sup>39</sup> *Rocketman*, directed by Dexter Fletcher (Paramount Pictures, 2019).

imposed [crisis](#) to embracing the ugly parts of their soul long enough to gain humility and a life of new meaning.

To live out this journey is certainly a challenge as embracing the ugly parts of the soul means facing, working through, and ultimately accepting one's own contradictions. This is a paradox, learning to simultaneously love and rein in these ugly parts as they are redeemed and integrated into a healthier and more holistic sense of self. Bono and the members of U2 learned this reality through their own music.

I too, wanted to make music capable of carrying its own weight, even the weight of our own contradictions. To be 'in the world but not of it' was the challenge in the scriptures that would take a lifetime to figure out. As artists we were slowly uncovering paradox and the idea that we are not compelled to resolve every contradictory impulse.<sup>40</sup>

While not easy, this transformational soul care journey of healing is available to those who learn to hug your cactus and help others do the same.

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<sup>40</sup> Bono, *Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022), 143.

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT To Participate in a Research Study Focus Group

Doctor of Ministry Thesis  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary – South Hamilton, MA  
Title of Research Project: Cactus Hugging as Soul Care  
Researcher: Pastor Chris Holder  
Phone Number: 214-535-1894  
Email: pastorholder@betheldallas.org

#### A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Chris Holder is conducting research on the metaphor of Cactus Hugging as it relates to Soul Care. The purpose of your participation in this research is to help the researcher gather information for the completion of the Thesis-Project; which is a requirement for his completion of the Doctor of Ministry Degree at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your work as a soul care (pastoral/chaplaincy care) provider. If you are not as familiar with the term soul care, David G. Benner in his book *"Care of Souls"* provides the following helpful definition.

"We can define soul care as the support and restoration of the well-being of persons in their depth and totality, with special concern for their inner life... The goal of such care can be described as fostering the psycho-spiritual growth of this inner-person." (p. 23)

#### B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

1. You will watch a brief YouTube video of a speech given by Robert Downey Jr. where he shares the metaphor of "hugging the cactus."
2. After the video you will have the chance to fill out a brief questionnaire to help summarize your thoughts regarding the six parts of the cactus hugging metaphor.
3. Finally, you will participate in a discussion group where you will be able to share your thoughts with others.

### C. RISKS

The questions will be personal in nature and therefore could cause personal embarrassment or discomfort in answering. Therefore, you are in no obligation to answer any questions during the focus group or on the questionnaire.

### D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities of participants will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All data collection and retention methods will be given number codes and stored securely. No names or any other identification markers will be placed on them. Only the researcher will have access to the files after the data is collected.

### E. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

The anticipated benefit of your participation in this study is to help you consider the benefits of the metaphor of cactus hugging as it relates to the care of your own soul and as you provide soul care to others.

### F. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your decision whether or not to participate in this study is voluntary and will not affect your relationship to the researcher or your ability to otherwise participate in the prayer retreat. If you choose to participate in this study, you can withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice.

### G. QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Chris Holder by calling 214-535-1894. You can also contact Dr. David Currie, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary at 978-646-4176 or dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu with any questions about the rights of research participants or research related concerns.

### CONSENT

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE AGREED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY AFTER READING ALL OF THE INFORMATION ABOVE AND YOU UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION IN THIS FORM, HAVE HAD ANY QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND MAY REQUEST A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOU TO KEEP.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Research Participant

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

## APPENDIX B

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Cactus Hugging as Soul Care

The metaphor of “hugging the cactus” comes from a speech that the actor Robert Downey gave as he was introducing his friend Mel Gibson during an award presentation. During this time Gibson was going through some public struggles of his own and was a somewhat unexpected choice for the honor. “To some surprise, Downey gave the gift of public acceptance to the embattled actor [Gibson]; ...the defense was a return of kindness for Downey. Gibson gave “The Avengers” actor a job in 2003’s “The Singing Detective” after his drug arrests made him uninsurable.”<sup>1</sup> With this time in mind, Downey reflected on the following advice his friend had once offered him:

“Actually I asked Mel to present me with this reward for a reason. When I couldn’t get sober, he told me not to give up hope, and he urged me to find my faith. It didn’t have to be his faith or anyone else’s, as long as it was rooted in forgiveness. And I couldn’t get hired, so he cast me as the lead in a movie that was actually developed for him. He kept a roof over my head, and he kept food on the table. And most importantly, he said if I accepted responsibility for my wrongdoings and if I embraced that part of my soul that was ugly — “hugging the cactus,” he calls it — he said that if I “hugged the cactus” long enough, I’d become a man of some humility and that my life would take on a new meaning. And I did, and it worked. All he asked in return was that someday I help the next guy in some small way. It’s reasonable to assume that at the time he didn’t imagine that the next guy would be him or that someday was tonight.”<sup>2</sup>

In this short, yet powerful speech several concepts form around this idea of cactus hugging. Looking at it more closely one can see the outline of a cactus hugging journey being mapped out; a journey from shame, brokenness and false or shadow self towards humility, healing, and ultimately a life of new meaning. This cactus hugging journey is laid out in six parts that are best seen more fluidly than as rigid sequential steps. In reflecting through these six parts, consider how they relate to caring both for your own soul and providing soul care to others

*When life is not working don't give up hope*

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Sarah Anne, "Robert Downey Jr. asks world to forgive Mel Gibson." The Washington Post, October 7, 2011, accessed August 10, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIqANRnCrL\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIqANRnCrL_blog.html).

<sup>2</sup> The Telegraph, “Robert Downey Jr asks forgiveness for Mel Gibson,” October 18, 2011, accessed August 10, 2020, video, 2:03, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_AAJuyxnTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AAJuyxnTQ).



*Find a faith rooted in forgiveness*

*Take personal responsibility for wrong doings*

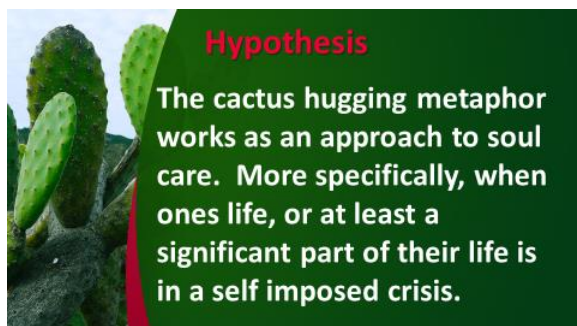
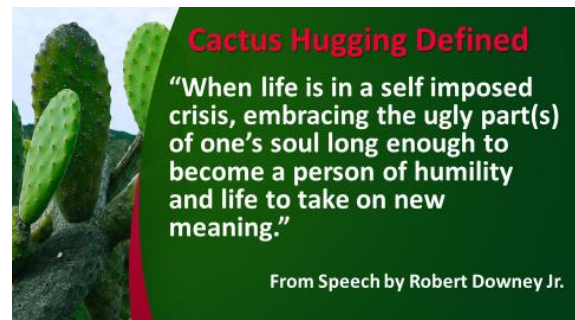
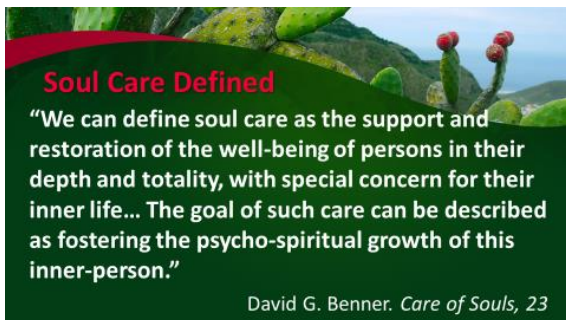
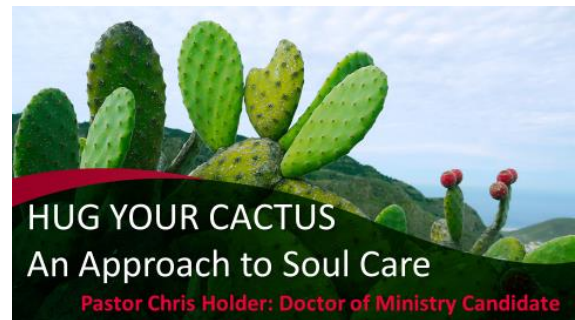
*Embrace the ugly parts of your soul*

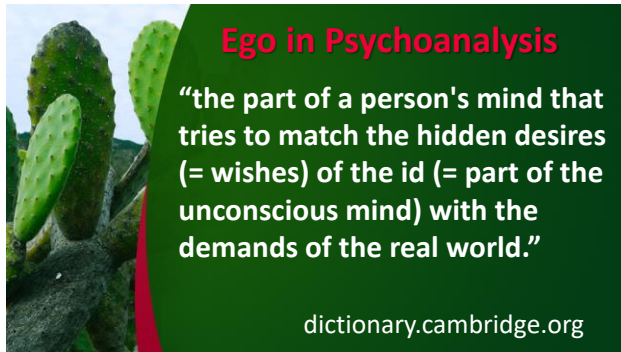
*Do this long enough and gain some humility*

*Life will then take on a new meaning*

## APPENDIX C

### POWER POINT PRESENTATION

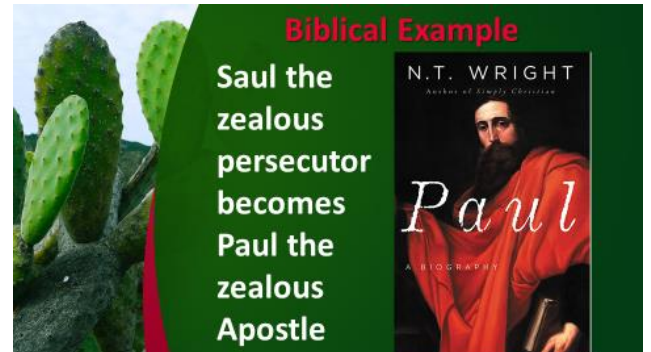




## Ego in Psychoanalysis

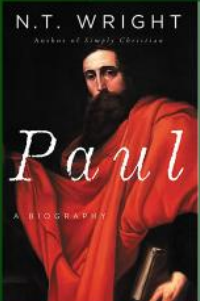
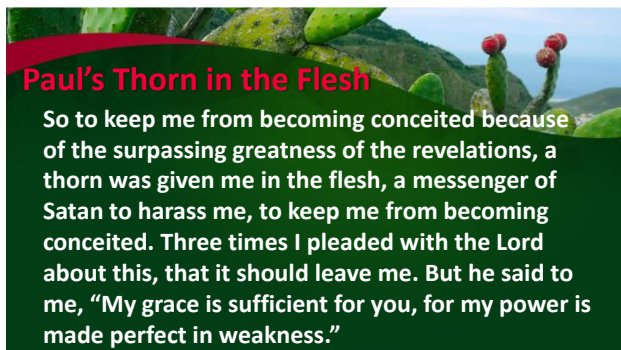
“the part of a person's mind that tries to match the hidden desires (= wishes) of the id (= part of the unconscious mind) with the demands of the real world.”

dictionary.cambridge.org



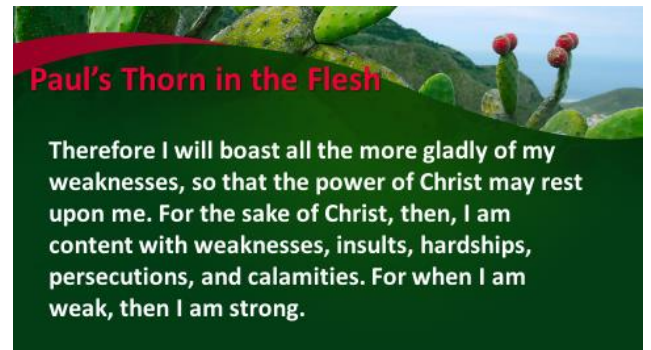
## Biblical Example

Saul the zealous persecutor becomes Paul the zealous Apostle

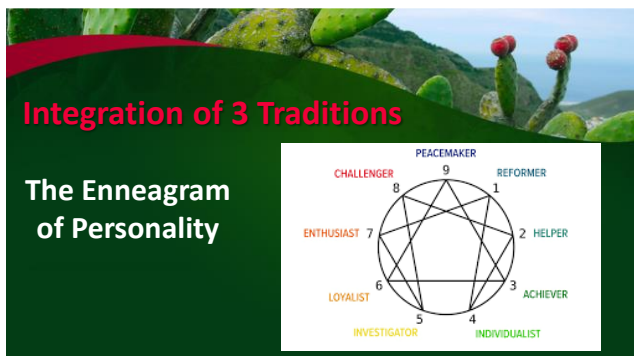
## Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”




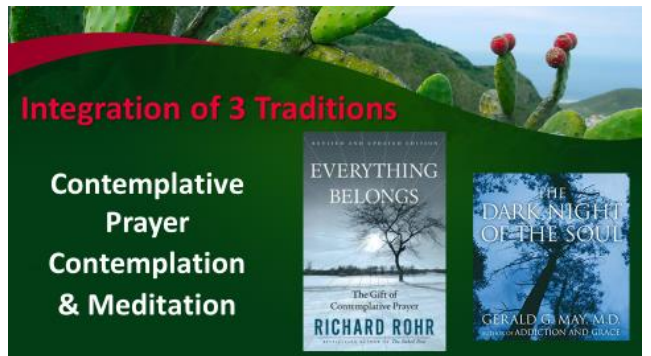
## Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.



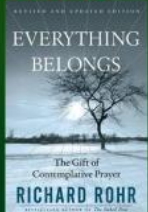
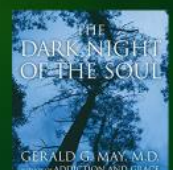
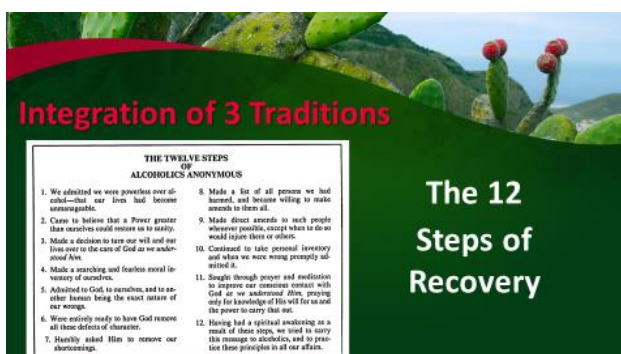
## Integration of 3 Traditions

### The Enneagram of Personality

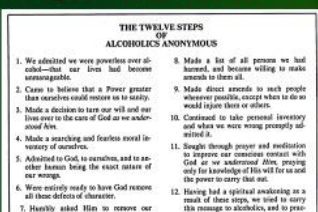
## Integration of 3 Traditions

Contemplative Prayer  
Contemplation & Meditation

## Integration of 3 Traditions

### The 12 Steps of Recovery




## Hug Your Cactus!!

As upward growth

Long Enough

### Humility & New Meaning

Embrace the Ugly  
Personal Responsibility  
Faith - Forgiveness  
Don't give up Hope  
Self Imposed Crisis

## APPENDIX D

### BLOG AND POST



## Intro to Hugging Your Cactus

The metaphor of “hugging the cactus” originates from a speech that the actor Robert Downey gave as he was introducing his friend Mel Gibson during an award presentation. During this time Gibson was going through some public struggles of his own and was a somewhat unexpected choice for the honor. “To some surprise, Downey gave the gift of public acceptance to the embattled actor [Gibson]; ...the defense was a return of kindness for Downey. Gibson gave “The Avengers” actor a job in 2003’s “The Singing Detective” after his drug arrests made him uninsurable.”<sup>[1]</sup> With this time in mind, Downey reflected on the following advice his friend had once offered him:

Here is a link to the speech itself:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_AAJuynxnTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AAJuynxnTQ)



“Actually I asked Mel to present me with this reward for a reason. When I couldn’t get sober, he told me not to give up hope, and he urged me to find my faith. It didn’t have to be his faith or anyone else’s, as long as it was rooted in forgiveness. And I couldn’t get hired, so he cast me as the lead in a movie that was actually developed for him. He kept a roof over my head, and he kept food on the table. And most importantly, he said if I accepted responsibility for my wrongdoings and if I embraced that part of my soul that was ugly — “hugging the cactus” he calls it — he said that if I “hugged the cactus” long enough, I’d become a man of some humility and that my life would take on a new meaning. And I did, and it worked. All he asked in return was that someday I help the next guy in some small way. It’s reasonable to assume that at the time he didn’t imagine that the next guy would be him or that someday was tonight.”<sup>[2]</sup>

In this short yet powerful speech, several concepts form around this idea of hugging your cactus. Looking at it more closely one can see the outline of a cactus hugging journey being mapped out; a journey from shame, brokenness and false or shadow self toward humility, healing, a more holistic sense of self, and ultimately a life of new meaning. This is an invitation to deny or “die to” self or ego and is laid out in six parts that are best seen more fluidly than as rigid sequential steps. The following brief unpacking and application of this speech has been influenced from research toward my Doctor of Ministry thesis project at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

#### *When life is not working don’t give up hope*

Life, or at least a part of life not working means that something has gone wrong, perhaps even for an extended period of time. The 12 Step tradition refers to this as “life as no longer manageable.” One important point here is that in hugging your cactus a self-inflicted crisis is directly related to one’s life not working. This could be a single really bad choice, a pattern of behavior, or something in between. Whatever the reason when one realizes this, it is important not to lose or give up their hope that things can get better, that healing and an authentic personal transformation is possible. This healing happens best in community, so here it is important for one not to isolate their self in despair, but instead find others who can be a source of hope, support, and encouragement. It is also important here to recognize that the sense of despair and hopelessness is there for a reason. Therefore it’s also important to not move on from hopelessness too soon. Instead, lean into it and learn from it, for the cactus hugging journey does involve dealing with pain, even self-inflicted pain. Working through despair can actually be an important part of connecting with authentic hope; however, it is also important not to stay in hopelessness too long as hope is an essential part of the cactus hugging journey.

#### *Find a faith rooted in forgiveness*

Closely related to the idea of hope in the cactus hugging journey is faith, specifically a faith that is rooted in forgiveness. The alternative here is a faith rooted in performance or perfection, and yet, simply trying harder does not work. Forgiveness is key in accepting that one is responsible for the crisis that has led to their life not working, and forgiveness takes practice; without forgiveness there can be no real or lasting hope. It is also worth noting that the ability to both give and receive forgiveness are equally important here and that often the most difficult person to forgive is one’s self.

### *Take personal responsibility for wrongdoings*

It is worth noting that accepting and taking responsibility for wrong doings is very difficult, yet this is also where real change can start to happen. Self awareness comes into play in a strong way here as one comes to terms with their real self, the part of self that has caused harm to others. This again is painful, yet it is why one must lean into the pain and despair, but not stay there either. This is closely related to forgiveness, for a true sense of forgiveness actually promotes greater personal responsibility. Community is again important here as one invites others to give tough love and help them see their failures, blind-spots, and weaknesses. We all need help in identifying our wrongdoings as we learn to take responsibility for them. This is also the part in the journey where one identifies their cactus, or the ugly part of their soul. This is the part of self or ego, that shadow or “false” part of self that is the root or source of the wrongdoings and that has led to the self-inflicted crisis of life not working. Knowing one’s personality type from a profile like the Enneagram, Myers-Briggs, or others can be a good place to start. Each type in these profiles identifies both core strengths and weaknesses; it’s from these weaknesses that certain patterns of negative behavior can be observed, and that one’s cactus can generally be found.

### *Embrace the ugly parts of your soul*

This is the part of the journey where one’s cactus, the ugly part(s) of their soul, is not only acknowledged, but also embraced. The word “embraced” here can mean different things depending the person’s background or perspective. The point here is not to resolve those differences or provide a definitive answer, but instead to present some possibilities to consider. For example, one potential reason to hug your cactus and embrace the ugly parts of your soul is to recognize and even love that part of you and your story – because these are not going away. “Embrace” can also mean to accept these parts of self, knowing them so well that you learn to rein them in to limit damage they cause to one’s self and others. Since these ugly parts can also be the parts of self that one wants to discard or get rid of, embracing them can additionally mean learning to integrate them into one’s life. It can even mean to become comfortable with, and affirm, these parts of yourself.

It is important to acknowledge that the metaphor of hugging a cactus implies experiencing something painful. It is painful because it requires going beyond the surface into the deeper parts of self to deal with the ugliness that is there. Yet, as we have seen from the other parts of this journey this same pain also facilitates personal growth, healing, and a more holistic sense of self.

### *Do this long enough and gain some humility*

A journey or process like hugging your cactus or embracing the ugly parts of the soul takes time to actually work; it is not a quick fix that happens overnight. In this process the pain that has been referred to throughout this journey can finally start to produce real change. The use of the cactus in the metaphor is helpful here, because even with its prickly thorns a cactus can produce beautiful flowers and even, in some cases, fruit. However, this time involved in “hugging the cactus long enough” is not simply idle time. Instead, one leans into and works through these ugly parts of the soul. This includes investing in spiritual disciplines like meditation and

contemplative prayer; that create the space for one to reflect on various parts of the cactus hugging journey. The result or “fruit” of this time spent working through these ugly parts of the soul is to become a person of some humility. This is tied closely to accepting personal responsibility, as owning one’s part in the world’s problems breeds humility. Therefore, as one struggles through their own wrongdoings and brokenness they can start to understand that they are not the center of the universe, and see their self from a healthier perspective. This affirms the original invitation of the cactus hugging journey to, yourself, die to self and ego.

*Life will take on a new meaning*

This last part of the cactus hugging journey expresses the importance of finding purpose in one’s brokenness. This includes realizing that one’s story has changed, and then accepting this change and new meaning. Like becoming a person of humility, mentioned above, this new meaning in life is not instant – it takes time to develop. One aspect of this new meaning is to have a greater sense of gratitude and contentment in life, which may in turn lead to less of a need for meaning at all. Perhaps the most important part of the journey is not the benefit that the one hugging the cactus receives, but rather how it enables them to better help others. This includes the ability to see the ugly parts of others with a newfound sense of compassion and grace. Downey Jr. in his speech refers to this at very end when he mentions that Gibson only asked him to “help the next guy.” This ability to “pay it forward” demonstrates a life that has truly taken on new meaning. Storytelling is also an important part of this healing process, especially in relating the cactus hugging journey to others. All of this is the result of the cactus hugging journey: going from a place of self-imposed crisis, to embracing the ugly parts of one’s soul, to overtime integrating these parts into a fuller, more holistic sense of self. Downey Jr. affirms this by saying, “I did it and it worked.” Following this cactus hugging journey has worked in my life as well and I have found many others who have benefitted personally from it along the way.

A link to my You-Tube video that unpacks this speech in a different format:

[https://youtu.be/CXS\\_4rqngnY](https://youtu.be/CXS_4rqngnY)

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[1] Hughes, Sarah Anne, “Robert Downey Jr. asks world to forgive Mel Gibson.” The Washington Post, October 7, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIQANRnCrL\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritology/post/robert-downey-jr-asks-world-to-forgive-mel-gibson/2011/10/17/gIQANRnCrL_blog.html).

APPENDIX E

YOU-TUBE CHANEL AND VIDEO







## Intro to Hugging Your Cactus

80 views 1d ago ...more



Hug Your Cactus 7



5



Share



Download



Clip

## APPENDIX F

### LOGO AND TATOO



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## VITA

Chris Holder was born in El Paso, Texas. In 2000 he earned a Bachelor of Science from Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, Texas. Chris graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary in 2005 with a Master of Arts in Christian Education. Chris was certified as a Director of Christian Education in the Lutheran Church Missouri-Synod in 2003 through Concordia University Texas. He was also ordained as a pastor by the same church body in 2016 through the Specific Ministry Pastor program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. With a passion for engaging diverse communities and making a real difference in the lives of others he has served in a variety of ministry roles including Youth Minister, Missions Pastor, and Director of Non-profits. He is currently serving as the Lead Pastor and soul care provider at Bethel Lutheran Church in Dallas, Texas; and also serves on the Board of several non-profits. He has an adult daughter Emily, whom he adopted from the foster care system in 2009. In July 2018 he began his Doctor of Ministry studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, with an expected graduation date of May 2023.